

Meta-ethnography: An Effective Integrative Synthesis Qualitative Research Method Postprint

Authors: Yang Yuqi

Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose / Significance] Qualitative research methods constitute an important component of academic research. This study systematically summarizes and organizes domestic and international research findings related to meta-ethnography, forming a relatively comprehensive theoretical framework to provide reference for scholars in the information behavior field and other domains when selecting research methods for future academic studies. [Method / Process] From a multidisciplinary perspective, this study retrieves relevant literature on meta-ethnography research methods using Web of Science, employs the literature review method, and synthesizes the research status and applications of meta-ethnography through bibliometric and content analysis. The application section specifically emphasizes studies in the information behavior field that have adopted this method. [Results / Conclusion] Meta-ethnography represents one of the important methods for qualitative research. Domestic research employing the meta-ethnography method remains relatively scarce. This study facilitates scholars' comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the meta-ethnography research method by summarizing its development and evolution, distinctions from other methods, applicable types and characteristics, implementation steps, and application outcomes in existing disciplines.

Full Text

Preamble

ChinaXiv Collaborative Journal: Meta-ethnography: An Effective Comprehensive Integration Qualitative Research Method

Hubei Minzu University Library, Enshi 445000

Abstract

[Purpose/significance] Qualitative research methods constitute an important component of academic inquiry. This study systematically reviews relevant research on meta-ethnography both domestically and internationally, forming a relatively complete theoretical framework to provide reference for scholars in information behavior and other fields when selecting research methods.

[Method/process] From a multidisciplinary perspective, this paper uses Web of Science to retrieve literature on meta-ethnography research methods, employing bibliometric and content analysis methods to summarize the research status and application of meta-ethnography methods, with the application section focusing on introducing research on meta-ethnography in the field of information behavior.

[Results/conclusion] Meta-ethnography is one of the important methods for qualitative research, and there are few domestic studies using this method. This study summarizes the development history of meta-ethnography, its differences from other methods, applicable types and characteristics, implementation steps, and application results in existing disciplines, which will help scholars fully understand the meta-ethnography research method.

Keywords: meta-ethnography, qualitative research, methodology

Classification Number: G252

Citation format: Yang Yuqi. Meta-ethnography: An Effective Comprehensive Integration Qualitative Research Method [J/OL]. Knowledge Management Forum, 2020, 5(5): 329-336. <http://www.kmf.ac.cn/p/227/>.

1 Introduction

Meta-ethnography, first proposed by G.W. Noblit and R.D. Hare in 1988, is a method for synthesizing qualitative research findings. As an important approach for comprehensive integration in qualitative research, it has been widely applied in fields such as healthcare, education, and social sciences. The method involves seven stages and enables researchers to systematically analyze and synthesize findings from multiple qualitative studies to generate new theoretical insights. Over the past three decades, meta-ethnography has evolved from a novel synthesis approach to an established methodological framework, with applications spanning diverse disciplines including medicine, nursing, psychology, education, and information science.

2.1 Conceptual Definition of Meta-ethnography

Meta-ethnography is a systematic method for synthesizing qualitative research that differs fundamentally from traditional literature reviews. According to Noblit and Hare, it emphasizes the synthesis of concepts and theories across studies rather than mere summary. Campbell et al. define it as a process that

goes beyond simple aggregation to achieve interpretive integration of qualitative findings. The core of meta-ethnography lies in its ability to translate key concepts from individual studies into one another, creating a new interpretive framework that preserves the context of original studies while generating higher-level theoretical understanding. This translation process involves carefully comparing and contrasting concepts across studies to identify how they relate, contrast, or refute one another, ultimately building a more comprehensive theoretical synthesis.

2.2 Comparison with Other Methods

Compared to other qualitative synthesis methods, meta-ethnography offers distinct advantages. While methods like thematic analysis focus on identifying common themes across studies, meta-ethnography emphasizes the interpretive translation of concepts between studies, enabling the development of novel theoretical frameworks. Unlike simple narrative reviews that merely summarize findings, meta-ethnography systematically deconstructs and reconstructs concepts to create a cohesive synthesis. However, the method also faces challenges, including its time-intensive nature and the requirement for advanced interpretive skills from researchers. The approach demands deep engagement with both the content and context of primary studies, making it more rigorous but also more resource-intensive than alternative synthesis methods.

2.3 Applicable Types

Meta-ethnography is particularly suitable for synthesizing studies that explore complex social phenomena and human experiences. It is most effective when dealing with a body of qualitative research that employs diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches. The method is especially valuable when the research goal is to develop new theoretical insights rather than simply aggregate existing findings. Applicable fields include healthcare experiences, educational practices, organizational behaviors, and information seeking behaviors, where understanding the nuanced interplay between context and experience is crucial. Meta-ethnography excels when primary studies contain rich, contextual data that can be reinterpreted to generate higher-order concepts and theories.

3 Applications in Related Fields

3.1 International Research Across Disciplines

Internationally, meta-ethnography has been widely applied across numerous disciplines. In healthcare research, it has been used to synthesize studies on patient experiences, treatment adherence, and chronic disease management. For instance, studies have synthesized qualitative research on asthma action plans, stroke survivor experiences, and medication management. In education, meta-ethnography has been employed to analyze technology integration in teaching

and e-learning implementation. The method has also gained traction in information science, with studies synthesizing research on information seeking behavior and knowledge management benefits. Analysis of Web of Science data reveals that healthcare applications account for approximately 18.121% of meta-ethnography studies, followed by information behavior research at 15.660%, and educational studies at 12.752%. Other significant application areas include mental health, chronic disease management, and organizational studies.

3.2 Applications in Library and Information Science

In library and information science, meta-ethnography has been used to synthesize research on digital libraries, information seeking behavior, and knowledge management. For example, C. Urquhart applied meta-ethnography to synthesize research on information seeking behavior, analyzing 447 relevant studies. J. Skageby used the method to examine social information behavior, synthesizing 19 qualitative studies on online information sharing. A. Lindenmeyer et al. adapted meta-ethnography to study how COPD patients value different activities, demonstrating the method's flexibility in health information contexts. These applications highlight meta-ethnography's utility in generating comprehensive understanding of complex information phenomena and its capacity to bridge individual user experiences with broader theoretical frameworks in information science.

4.1 G. W. Noblit and R. D. Hare's Classic Seven Stages

Noblit and Hare's classic meta-ethnography comprises seven stages that provide a systematic framework for conducting synthesis. These stages are: (1) Getting started and formulating the research question, (2) Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest, (3) Reading the studies and extracting key concepts, (4) Determining how the studies are related, (5) Translating the studies into one another, (6) Synthesizing translations, and (7) Expressing the synthesis. Each stage involves specific analytical tasks that build upon one another to create a rigorous synthesis. The process begins with clearly defining the research question and ends with presenting a coherent theoretical synthesis that transcends individual study findings. Table 1 presents a detailed breakdown of these seven steps.

G. W. Noblit and R. D. Hare's Seven Steps of Meta-ethnography

4.2 Optimization and Integration of Steps

Building upon Noblit and Hare's original framework, subsequent researchers have proposed optimizations and integrations to enhance the method's rigor and applicability. The seven stages have been adapted to incorporate quality assessment procedures, such as the CASP (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme) criteria, which help evaluate the methodological quality of included studies. Some scholars have integrated the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for

Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to enhance transparency in reporting, ensuring that synthesis processes are clearly documented and reproducible. These refinements address practical challenges while maintaining the method's core interpretive approach, making meta-ethnography more accessible to researchers across disciplines. Additionally, contemporary applications have streamlined certain stages and developed software tools to facilitate the translation and synthesis processes, though the fundamental interpretive principles remain unchanged.

5 Conclusion

This paper systematically reviews the development, characteristics, and applications of meta-ethnography as an important qualitative synthesis method. By examining its theoretical foundations, comparing it with alternative approaches, and analyzing its implementation across disciplines, this study provides a comprehensive reference for scholars considering meta-ethnography for their research. The method's capacity for generating novel theoretical insights through interpretive synthesis makes it particularly valuable for fields dealing with complex human experiences and behaviors. Future research should continue to refine the method's procedures and expand its applications, particularly in emerging fields such as digital humanities and data science. As qualitative research continues to grow in volume and importance, meta-ethnography will remain a crucial tool for knowledge integration and theory development.

References

- [1] NOBLIT G W, HARE R D. Meta-ethnography: issues in the synthesis and replication of qualitative research[C/OL]// Proceedings of 67th Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association[2020-08-24]. <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED231853.pdf>.
- [2] NOBLIT G W, HARE R D. Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing qualitative studies[M]. Newbury Park: Sage, 1992.
- [4] CAMPBELL R, POUND P, POPE C, et al. Evaluating meta-ethnography: a synthesis of qualitative research on lay experiences of diabetes and diabetes care[J]. Social science & medicine, 2003, 56(4): 671-684.
- [5] TOYE F, SEERS K, ALLCOCK N, et al. Meta-ethnography 25 years on: challenges and insights for synthesising a large number of qualitative studies[J]. BMC medical research methodology, 2014, 14(1): 80-94.
- [6] CAMPBELL R, POUND P, MORGAN M. Evaluating meta-ethnography: systematic analysis and synthesis of qualitative research [J]. Health technology assessment, 2011, 15(43): 1-164.
- [7] FRANCE E F, WELLS M, LANG H, et al. Why, when and how to update a meta-ethnography qualitative synthesis[J]. Systematic reviews, 2016, 5(1): 44-

56.

- [8] LEVACK W M M. The role of qualitative metasynthesis in evidence-based physical therapy[J]. *Physical therapy reviews*, 2012, 17(6): 390-397.
- [9] RING N, JEPSON R, PINNOCK H, et al. Developing novel evidence-based interventions to promote asthma action plan use: a cross-study synthesis of evidence from randomised controlled trials and qualitative studies[J]. *Trials*, 2012, 13(1): 216-216.
- [10] WALSH M, GALVIN R, HORGAN N F. Fall-related experiences of stroke survivors: a meta-ethnography[J]. *Disability and rehabilitation*, 2017, 39(7): 10.
- [11] ALLISON T, KATE F, ELIZABETH M I, et al. Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research: ENTREQ[J]. *BMC medical research methodology*, 2012, 12(1): 181-181.
- [12] MUNRO S A, LEWIN S A, SMITH H J, et al. Patient adherence to tuberculosis treatment: a systematic review of qualitative research[J]. *PLOS medicine*, 2007, 4(7): 154-168.
- [13] SMITH L K, PPOE C, BOTHA J L. Patients' help-seeking experiences and delay in cancer presentation: a qualitative synthesis[J]. *Lancet*, 2015, 366(9488): 825-831.
- [14] ATKINS S, LEWIN S, SMITH H, et al. Conducting a meta-ethnography of qualitative literature: lessons learnt[J]. *BMC medical research methodology*, 2008, 8(1): 154-168.
- [15] MALPASS A, SHAW A, SHARP D, et al. "Medication career" or "moral career"? the two sides of managing antidepressants: a meta-ethnography of patients' experience of antidepressants[J]. *Social science & medicine*, 2009, 68(1): 154-168.
- [16] MAIR F S, MAY C, CATHERINE O D, et al. Factors that promote or inhibit the implementation of e-health systems: an explanatory systematic review[J]. *Bulletin of the world health organization*, 2012, 90(5): 357-364.
- [17] SIAU K, LONG Y. Synthesizing e-government stage models – a meta-synthesis based on meta-ethnography approach[J]. *Industrial management & data systems*, 2005, 105(4): 443-458.
- [18] TONDEUR J, BRAAK J V, SANG G, et al. Preparing pre-service teachers to integrate technology in education: a synthesis of qualitative evidence[J]. *Computers & education*, 2012, 59(1): 1-144.
- [19] SANDERS C, BISAILLON L. When health care is displaced by state interests: building dialogue through share findings[J]. *Qualitative health research*, 2019, 1(29): 1-144.
- [20] BHATTACHARYA A, CAMACHO D, KIMBERLY LL, et al. Women's experiences and perceptions of depression in India: a metaethnography[J]. *Qualitative health research*, 2019, 1(29): 1-144.

tative health research, 2019,29(1): 80-95.

[21] BRITTEN N, GARSIDE R, POPE C, et al. Asking more of qualitative synthesis: a response to sally thorne[J]. Qualitative health research, 2017, 27(9): 1370-1390.

[22] BONDAS T, HALL E O C. Challenges in approaching metasynthesis research[J]. Qualitative health research, 2007, 17(1): 113-121.

[23] URQUHART C. Meta-synthesis of research on information seeking behaviour[J]. Information research, 2011, 16(1): 95-116.

[24] LINDENMEYER A, GREENFIELD S M, GREENFIELD C, et al. How do people With COPD value different activities? an adapted meta-ethnography of qualitative research[J]. Qualitative health research, 2016:1-14.

[25] SKAGEBY J. The irony of serendipity: disruptions in social information behaviour[J]. Library Hi Tech, 2012, 30(2): 321-334.

[26] YAHYAPOUR S, SHAMIZANJANI M, MOSAKHANI M. A conceptual breakdown structure for knowledge management benefits using meta-synthesis method[J]. Journal of knowledge management, 2015, 19(6): 1295-

[28] SHALLCROSS R, DICKSON J M, NUNNS D, et al. Women's subjective experiences of living with Vulvodynia: a systematic review and Meta-Ethnography[J]. Archives of sexual behavior, 2017,47(40):

[29] WIKBERG A, BONDAS T. A patient perspective in research on intercultural caring in maternity care: a meta-ethnography[J]. International journal of qualitative studies on health and well-being, 2010, 5(1): 1-16.

[30] TOMBOR I, SHAHAB L, HERBEC A, et al. Smoker identity and its potential role in young adults' smoking behavior: a Meta-Ethnography[J]. Health psychology, 2015, 34(10): 992-1003.

[31] WILLIAMS S, RENJU J, GHILARDI L, et al. Scaling a waterfall: a meta-ethnography of adolescent progression through the stages of HIV care in sub-Saharan Africa[J]. Journal of the international AIDS society, 2017, 20(1):

[32] WAHID A S, SAYMA M, JAMSHAIID S, et al. Barriers and facilitators influencing death at home: a meta-ethnography[J]. Palliative medicine, 2017,32(7): 1-15.

[33] LAWRENCE C. A holistic narrative of culture's mediation of information systems innovation: A qualitative Meta-Synthesis[J]. Journal of global information technology management, 2014, 16(3): 31-52.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.