

Title: Synthesizing qualitative research

Presenters: Bediha Ipekci, Greta Kaluzeviciute, Heidi M. Levitt, Zenobia Morrill, Javier L. Rizo, William B. Stiles, Jochem Willemsen (chair)

Discussant: Ladislav Timulák, Associate professor, Trinity College Dublin, Ireland

Abstract: A sizeable body of scientific literature has been generated that uses qualitative methods to collect and analyse data in the field of psychotherapy. In order to utilise this body of literature for the development of theory, practice and policy, different methods are used to synthesize and integrate qualitative studies. Qualitative meta-analysis is a method developed in social and health sciences for synthesizing insights derived from qualitative studies. In this panel, three strategies to synthesize findings from qualitative studies in the field of psychotherapy will be discussed. The first presentation will focus on meta-analysis of primary qualitative studies. After a brief introduction to the new APA standards for reporting qualitative meta-analysis, findings of an omnibus meta-analysis on the literature on therapists' experiences in psychotherapy will be presented. The second presentation will demonstrate the method of theoretical synthesis, in which a guiding theory enables the aggregation and integration of various primary qualitative studies. This strategy will be illustrated with a review guided by the assimilation model. The third presentation will discuss the potential and limits of using case studies as primary material in a qualitative meta-analysis. A tool for the evaluation of the evidential quality of case studies will be presented and demonstrated. The panel will end with a critical reflection on the value of synthesizing qualitative research in the field of psychotherapy.

Keywords: qualitative meta-analysis, qualitative research, theory development, theoretical synthesis, case study

Learning objectives:

At the end of this session, the learner will be able to:

1. Explain the relevance of qualitative research for theory, practice and policy development in the field of psychotherapy
2. Describe 3 different strategies to synthesize qualitative research in the field of psychotherapy
3. Identify strengths and weaknesses in strategies to synthesize qualitative research

Paper in a panel

Title: A New Agenda for Research on Personalizing Therapy: Findings from an Omnibus Qualitative Meta-analysis of Therapists' Experience

Author: Heidi M. Levitt (University of Massachusetts Boston), Bediha Ipekci (UMass Boston), Zenobia Morrill (UMass Boston) and Javier L. Rizo (UMass Boston)

Abstract:

Aim: Qualitative meta-analyses are a relatively new method for psychotherapy researchers. This presentation briefly will orient the audience to key elements of the American Psychological Association (APA) standards for reporting qualitative meta-analysis (Levitt et al. 2018), now in the 7th edition of the APA publication manual, but will focus upon findings from an omnibus meta-analysis on the literature on therapists' experiences in psychotherapy.

Methods: Using a grounded theory meta-method, we reviewed 140 studies that ranged in qualitative method and topic, incorporating consensus procedures. Inclusion criteria included a focus on adult individual psychotherapy based in therapists' descriptions, and English-language articles.

Results: Findings will focus on three of the six clusters in the analysis. In describing the first cluster, we present an understanding of the therapy relationship that seeks to expand the focus of the field from a concentration on the alliance (as defined by goals, tasks and bond) toward an emphasis on those elements of the relationship that therapists perceive as actively transformative. Our second set of findings considers how therapists can support client agency, providing specific direction that can be instrumental for both clinical practice and training. Finally, the third cluster focuses on therapists' own self-development and the processes by which therapists report seeking to develop a rich internal world that, in turn, influences the therapy process.

Discussion: We consider how this conceptualization can further responsiveness in psychotherapy training and practice. In addition, our presentation discusses recommendations for researchers by highlighting the methods and inquiry approaches that are commonly used.

Keywords: qualitative meta-analysis, therapists' experiences, therapeutic relationship, client agency, self-development

Paper in a panel

Title: Theoretical synthesis of qualitative research results

Author: William B. Stiles (Miami University and Appalachian State University)

Abstract:

Aims: Like all reviewing methods, theoretical synthesis aims for aggregation and generalization. Reviewers aim to pull together a body of work to permit statements of broader relevance and greater confidence than is achieved in isolated studies. The puzzle is how to do this in the case of qualitative research, where rich observations are not restricted to a few specified variables.

Method: A guiding theory offers a vehicle for aggregation and integration. The range of generality is specified by the theory itself. As in primary theory-building research, qualitative research observations are framed in theoretical terms and the fit with existing theory is assessed. Confidence in the theory is then adjusted depending on whether or not the observations fit the theory, and the theory itself is adjusted (modified, elaborated, expanded) to fit unexpected observations, an operation called *abduction*. This is how observations are integrated in natural sciences that have a Kuhnian paradigm.

Results: A review guided by the assimilation model, a theory of psychological change, offers an illustration. Results of studies dealing with how work with a therapist advances the therapeutic process, therapeutic collaboration, client ambivalence, therapist errors, and setbacks in the treatment process can be understood (synthesized) using the theoretical concept of the therapeutic zone of proximal development.

Discussion: In contrast to the meta-analytic strategies used in fact-gathering research (qualitative or quantitative), theoretical synthesis can integrate distinctive or rare observations as well as common observations. It can thus accommodate the richness and range characteristic of clinical observations of psychotherapy.

Keywords: theoretical synthesis, qualitative research, theory-building, abduction, assimilation model

Paper in a panel

Title: Generating knowledge from case studies: presentation of the Case Study Evaluation-tool (CaSE) and a worked example

Author: Greta Kaluzeviciute (University of Essex, UK) and Jochem Willemsen (Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium)

Abstract:

Aim: The aim of this presentation is to discuss the potential and the limitations of qualitative meta-analysis as a method to synthesize knowledge from published case studies. Case studies contain rich, contextualized knowledge about therapy processes. Synthesizing this knowledge through qualitative meta-analysis holds the promise of developing generalisable knowledge from case studies. However, one of the challenges of this approach is the varying evidential quality of case studies.

Method: The Case Study Evaluation-tool (CaSE) is developed on the basis of existing tools for the assessment of primary qualitative research in the context of a qualitative meta-analysis. The tool is applied to published psychotherapy cases from the Single Case Archive.

Results: A first version of the CaSE-tool will be presented, as well as its application in a qualitative meta-analysis of published case studies on therapist interventions and therapeutic alliance building in psychoanalytic psychotherapy. The first results of this study will be presented as a means to demonstrate the utility of the tool.

Discussion: The CaSE-tool fills a gap in the field of psychotherapy case study research by providing a framework and method to evaluate the evidential quality of a single (clinical or systematic) case study in relation to a specific research question. Qualitative meta-analysis of case studies can provide practice-level theories that are both evidence-based and close to clinical practice.

Keywords: qualitative meta-analysis, case study, qualitative research, alliance, psychoanalytic psychotherapy