

# QUALITATIVE METASYNTHESIS

Sally Thorne, RN, PhD, FCAHS, FAAN  
Professor, School of Nursing  
Associate Dean, Faculty of Applied Science  
University of British Columbia, Vancouver

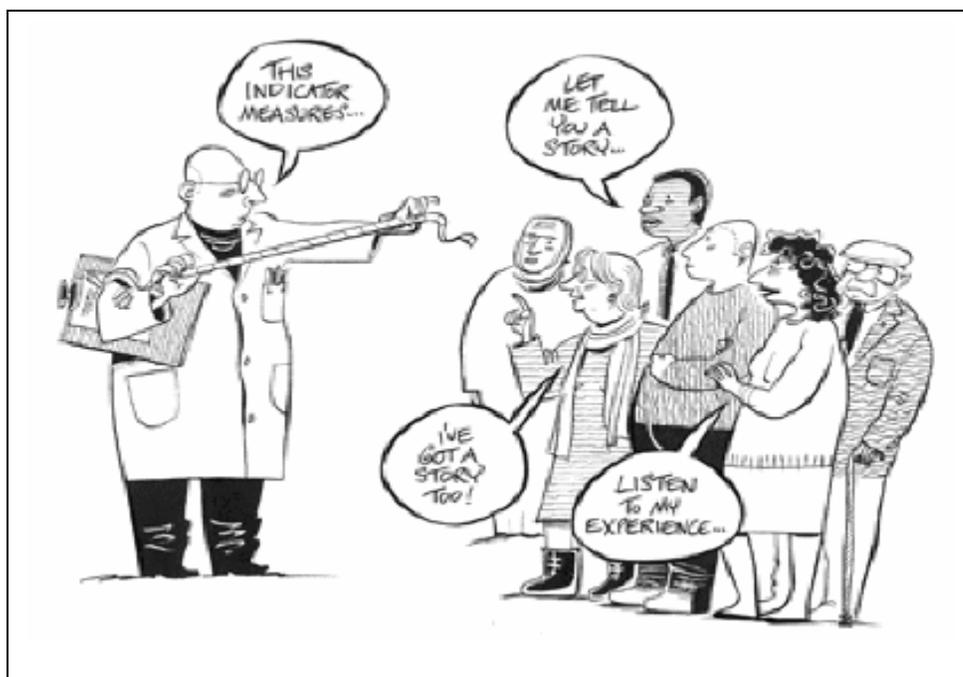
sally.thorne@nursing.ubc.ca

## Purpose:

As the body of available qualitative research reports has grown, scholars have searched for appropriate ways to aggregate, combine and synthesize what are often disparate sets of results into a coherent form of knowledge suitable for consideration as the kind of evidence that may be needed to inform policy or practice. Although the idea of qualitative metasynthesis has wide appeal, it is also apparent that there are significant technical and conceptual challenges associated with integrating multiple qualitative products into a final product that has practical utility. This workshop will provide participants with both theoretical and practical grounding in the challenge of qualitative meta-synthesis, introducing the components of methodology as well as the complexities of epistemological positioning within the larger context of evidence claims. It will expand understanding about systematic review processes in the qualitative domain, and inform their capacity to understand when, how and why metasynthesis may be a

## Recommended Pre-Reading:

1. Thorne, S., Jensen, L. A., Kearney, M. H., Noblit, G., Sandelowski, M. (2004). Reflections on the methodological and ideological agenda in qualitative meta-synthesis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 14, 1342-1365.



## Considerations in Reading Qualitative Methodological Sources:

- What conceptual strategies are required to label and categorize data?
- How would one distinguish superficial from deep conceptual analysis?
- On what basis might one conclude that data have been misinterpreted?
- Why is synthesis of findings across various studies so difficult?
- How can qualitative metasynthesis produce generalizations about phenomena?
- How can the uniqueness of original research accounts be reconciled with the holism of a phenomenon under study?
- How can we explain contradictory claims between researchers?
- How similar do original accounts have to be before we can conclude that the findings represent a consensus of opinion?
- What kind of generalizations can metasynthesis permit?

### Primary Study Worksheet (Data Collection Tool)

Research Question: Explicit and implied	
Theoretical Orientation: Explicit and implied	
Methodological Orientation: Explicit and implied	
Details of the Sample:	
Details of the Data Collection Approaches:	
Details of the Data Analysis Methods:	
Summary of Major Findings: Conclusions & take-home messages	

## Suggested Further Reading & Resources

### Books

- Paterson, B., Thorne, S., Canam, C., Jillings, C. 2001. *Meta-study of qualitative health research: A practical guide to meta-analysis and meta-synthesis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.  
[This book is a practical guide to the steps associated with meta-method, meta-theory and meta-data-analysis as precursors to synthesis in a meta-synthesis project. It is useful for deconstructing the epistemological, theoretical and disciplinary underpinnings of a field of study so that it can be more fully understood from a critical perspective that uncovers patterns in the scholarship that may not previously have been recognized].
- Sandelowski, M., Barroso, J. 2007. *Handbook for synthesizing qualitative research*. New York: Springer.  
[This book compiles insights from a collection of previously published papers by prolific authors in the field. It is both practical and philosophical, presenting many of the ongoing debates and disputations in the field as well as providing sensible guidance on how to ensure that your qualitative synthesis project will be meaningful, useful, and make scholarly sense.

### Articles

- Bondas, T., & Hall, E. O.C. (2007). Challenges in Approaching Metasynthesis Research. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17, 113-121.
- Dixon-Woods, M., Agarwal, S., Jones, D., Young, B. & Sutton, A., (2005). Synthesising qualitative and quantitative evidence: A review of possible methods. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*. 10 (1), 45–53.
- Finfgeld, D. L. 2003. Metasynthesis: The state of the art -- so far. *Qualitative Health Research* 13, 893-904.
- Fleming, K. 2007. Synthesis of qualitative research and evidence-based nursing. *British Journal of Nursing* 16(10), 616-620.
- Forbes, A., Griffiths, P. 2002. Methodological strategies for the identification and synthesis of 'evidence' to support decision-making in relation to complex healthcare systems and practices. *Nursing Inquiry* 9(3), 141-155.
- Harden, A., Thomas, J. 2005. Methodological issues in combining diverse study types in systematic reviews. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 8(3), 257-271.
- Kearney, M. H. 2001. Levels and applications of qualitative research evidence. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 24 145-153.
- Sandelowski, M. 2006. "Meta-Jeopardy": The crisis of representation in qualitative metasynthesis. *Nursing Outlook* 54, 10-16.
- Sandelowski, M., Barroso, J. 2003. Creating metasummaries of qualitative findings. *Nursing Research*, 52, 226-233.
- Sandelowski, M., Docherty, S., Emden, C. 1997. Qualitative metasynthesis: Issues and techniques. *Research in Nursing & Health* 20, 365-371.
- Sandelowski, M., Voils, C. I., Barroso, J. 2007. Comparability work and the management of difference in research synthesis studies. *Social Science & Medicine* 64(236-247).
- Sherwood, G. 1999. Meta-synthesis: Merging qualitative studies to develop nursing knowledge. *International Journal for Human Caring* 3(1), 37-42.
- Thorne, S. (2009). The role of qualitative research within an evidence-based context: Can metasynthesis be the answer? *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 46, 569-575