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**Review of "Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research," by  
Margaret Sandelowski and Julie Barroso**

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Margaret Sandelowski and Julie Barroso, *Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2006. 284 pp. ISBN 0-8261-5694-0 (pbk).

## INTRODUCTION

Months ago I conducted a literature search of systematic reviews in my field of interest, marital/couple therapy. I became disenchanted by the plethora of systematic reviews of quantitative research that virtually overshadowed the contribution of qualitative research. Undoubtedly, much of this problem was due to the dearth of qualitative studies. Still, some qualitative research existed and appeared to involuntarily abdicate its deserved recognition.

Ultimately, I decided to venture into (what I thought was) the unknown: a qualitative systematic review. A faculty member at Case Western Reserve University, Jerry Floersch, made my acquaintance with *Systematic Reviews in the Social Sciences: A Practical Guide* (Petticrew and Roberts, 2005). It was recently published and served as an impetus to keep moving forward with my idea. However, despite its general utility for systematic reviews, it was thin on ideas for qualitative research, usually suggesting outside references for qualitative research synthesis (QRS).

Being introduced to *Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research* (Sandelowski and Barroso, 2007) was like receiving manna from Heaven. Finally, I found a book that could steadily guide me through this process. Moreover, this book had potential for increasing my time efficiency and the quality of my research.

Sandelowski and Barroso quickly captured my interest by highlighting debate surrounding the issues of evidence-based practice and QRS. I identified strongly with the authors' statements regarding reasons for the emergence of QRS, namely 'the proliferation but relative undervaluation and underutilization of the findings of qualitative studies' and 'the desire to secure the place denied

to qualitative research as a source of best evidence in the evidence-based practice process' (p. 3). I saw this book as a potential impetus for changing the landscape of systematic reviews in marital/couple therapy and other related practice fields.

## BOOK CONTENT

The book's Introduction and first two chapters broadly cover QRS issues. The introduction provides an overall framework for approaching a qualitative systematic review by identifying assumptions, as well as a caveat regarding a review's trustworthiness. Chapter 1 discusses the key issues that gave rise to QRS. Additionally, the authors describe the debate about the importance and appropriateness of QRS. Chapter 2 defines, clarifies, and mentions two forms of QRS covered in the book: qualitative metasummary and qualitative metasynthesis. Other forms of inquiry are contrasted with QRS. The chapter ends with a discussion of the time and resources needed to complete a project.

Chapter 3 is where the hands-on, how-to process of conducting QRS begins, starting with setting parameters for a study. Four specific parameters are discussed, which answer the what (topical), who (population), when (temporal) and how (methodological) questions of a systematic review. Specifics for searching the literature are then outlined, followed by tips for making decisions about studies' relevance and managing the information found.

Chapter 4 discusses appraising studies. The authors define both experimental and 'amended-experimental' reports and provide a brief guide for evaluating them at the end of the chapter. Much of the chapter is devoted to using the guide effectively, yet flexibly with each individual study. Thereafter, Sandelowski and Barroso discuss comparative analysis between studies.

Chapter 5 discusses the classification of findings. It begins with a brief discussion of typologies, as well as a typology classification chart. Ensuing are sections briefly discussing the ongoing debate about assessing study quality, and empirical/analytical versus constructionist conceptions of data and findings. The chapter ends with further discussion of qualitative research typologies, where the authors elucidate typologies and the corresponding classification chart.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss qualitative metasummary and metasynthesis, respectively. In Chapter 6, five steps are listed and described for metasummary: extracting, editing, grouping, abstracting, and calculating. Tables provide examples of extracting, editing, and grouping findings, as well as calculating manifest frequency and intensity effect sizes. A box is dedicated to explaining abstraction. In Chapter 7, five different ideas for metasynthesis are presented and described: taxonomic analysis, constant targeted comparison, using imported concepts, reciprocal translation and synthesis of in vivo and imported concepts, and using an event timeline.

Chapter 8 discusses three ongoing procedures for optimizing validity in QRS: maintaining an auditing trail, negotiating consensual validity, and using expert peer review. The authors also discuss four different types of validity and how each type is achieved through these three ongoing procedures; a table at the end of the chapter summarizes this information.

The final chapter (Chapter 9) explains how to present findings from QRS. Philosophical assumptions are illuminated that pertain to an analytic/empirical view of findings and to a critical/discursive view. Elements needed for a QRS study in APA format are briefly discussed and highlighted in a table. A section is offered on using visual displays, numbers, and quotations. Finally, a section is devoted to innovative technological ways of disseminating findings.

## BOOK CRITIQUE

Strengths in this book are several. The authors articulated valuable comparisons in Chapter 2 between QRS and other forms of inquiry. Despite being steeped in a methodological quagmire, they provided reasonably clear and concise contrasts.

Another important strength of this book is the authors' acknowledgment of the debates that are an inherent part of considering QRS. The authors' primary focus of the debate is in Chapter 2, where they take the obvious position that QRS is a worthy endeavor. Yet, in other instances, the authors revisit debates surrounding QRS, which adds credibility to their position.

The coverage of conducting a literature search in Chapter 3 was comprehensive enough to complete an exhaustingly thorough literature search, yet simple enough to follow and understand. The authors appropriately explicate simple ideas. For example, they discuss scanning the shelves where relevant information is found. This idea is worth mentioning since technology can sometimes elude one's perception of an adequate literature search.

Several clear and thorough suggestions are given throughout the book. For example, Chapter 4 contains a particularly useful and comprehensive guide for appraising qualitative research. Additionally, ideas for conducting qualitative metasynthesis were well explicated. Examples for each concept solidified comprehension of the proposed ideas. Sandelowski and Barroso successfully illustrate how metasynthesis is rigorous and demanding of creativity and ingenuity, yet achievable. Finally, Chapters 3, 4, and 6 make reference to online supplements. These supplements illustrate and explain concepts and suggestions discussed in the chapter. They are user-friendly and helpful additions to the text.

The book's shortcomings primarily revolve around clarity and organization. This was particularly true of the tables, where either the layout was confusing, or where the use of bold headings and/or italics would have considerably

sharpened comparisons the authors were attempting to make. For example, tables in Chapter 6 contained a listing of several effect sizes. Instead, the authors could have used space to highlight one or two effect sizes and then presented the calculations in the table to show how the effect sizes were obtained. The authors instead used text to describe how to calculate effect sizes. The math concepts seemed quite elementary, but with the use of words, which forces one to keep terminology and definitions straight, the concepts were extremely difficult to follow.

Despite the strengths mentioned in Chapter 4, the introduction of comparative appraisal muddied the waters. The information available was good, but coverage of the topic seemed inadequate for one to genuinely grasp the content. One would likely need to explore a couple of references to comprehend it.

The book's organization could also have been enhanced. For example, it would benefit beginning researchers to read about resources needed for QRS either in the introduction or the first chapter rather than at the end of the second chapter. Also, notwithstanding the appropriate recognition of debates in qualitative research, the authors could have positioned some of the debate more judiciously. For example, they used the quality of qualitative research debate to emphasize their point regarding typology *after* they had already adequately defended their position about typology.

Despite the book's shortcomings, it should be a welcome addition to qualitative inquiry. The timeliness of this book cannot be overstated. Scholars from a variety of disciplines have argued in favor of broadening evidence-based practice to include qualitative inquiry (Gorey et al., 1998; Larner, 2004; Pearson, 2005; Robbins et al., 1999). One scholar in the evidence-based practice debate in mental health has stated: 'One major disadvantage of qualitative approaches is the difficulty of combining results across studies' (Hill, 2006: 78). This book could potentially bring qualitative out of the shadow of quantitative research, while also providing a solution to Hill's (2006) concern of combining results across studies.

Still, this optimism for a brighter future for qualitative research in evidence-based practice needs to be qualified with one last comment of critique. In laying a foundation for validity, the authors say that truth should be static 'at least for awhile' (p. 227) and say in the same paragraph that truth is socially constructed. The authors later use this argument in Chapter 9 to discuss how the notion of static truth is a necessary assumption for an empirical/analytical view of findings as 'empirically grounded' (p. 237); whereas the notion of socially constructed truth serves as the foundation for a critical/discursive view of findings, viewing findings as 'historically and culturally contingent social products of unique encounters between reviewers and texts' (p. 238).

The authors offer compelling reasons for using both views for analyzing findings, noting how this helps reviewers develop ‘representational humility’ (p. 240), while maintaining static truth ‘as a regulative ideal’ (p. 240). Nonetheless, this methodological and epistemological eclecticism appears in some sense to be a desperate attempt by the authors to appeal to the evidence-based community that has generally not viewed qualitative research as best evidence, and the qualitative community that has been skeptical of making qualitative research more systematic. This eclectic approach is the substance of the concern raised by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006):

One of the reasons why we have not yet seen an overwhelmingly convincing demonstration of the benefits of qualitative synthesis is that incorporating qualitative research in systematic reviews continues to represent a major challenge. There is an uneasy fit between the frame offered by conventional systematic review methodology and the kinds of epistemological assumptions and research practices associated with qualitative research. (p. 40)

This concern does not diminish the importance of Sandelowski and Barroso’s achievement, but rather puts it in the context of researchers on both sides of the fence that struggle to negotiate a middle ground. To their credit, the authors present themselves as being fully aware of these assumptions; and, in fact, these assumptions are in some sense a re-visitation of the book’s Introduction where the authors state: ‘The production of convincing findings lies at least as much (if not more) in how well they meet the expectations of readers representing a variety of interpretive communities as it does in the correspondence of these findings to actual events or “reality”’.

With the question of static truth versus socially constructed truth being unsettled, we are forced to accept (for now) that science is a production of knowledge that goes through an imperfect, human-being filter. Thus, the Introduction and the later-explicated assumptions about truth and analyzing findings set the stage for conducting QRS, which requires a great deal of effort, stamina, critical thinking, representational humility, and an understanding of the current science community context. Ultimately, this book will hardly serve as the final word on QRS, but hopefully it will be the springboard for stimulating the needed debate and dialogue on this subject (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).

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