

Using Qualitative Evidence Synthesis (QES) to Inform Policy and Program Implementation

Why use Qualitative Evidence Synthesis?

1. To synthesize an evidence base that is primarily qualitative in nature or whose primary data sources do not consistently report quantitative effect size data.
2. To answer research questions related to the nature and scope of an event, policy options in response to a trend or issue, implementation strategies for a particular policy option, or the effects of policies and programs.
3. To develop explanations of *why* changes occurred by compiling lessons on the conditions enabling and inhibiting policy/program effectiveness.

QES can be used to complement, or as an alternative to, quantitative meta-analysis.

Qualitative Evidence Synthesis can help unpack the complexities of designing and implementing policies and programs. It is distinctive from quantitative evidence synthesis (i.e., meta-analysis) due to its (a) source material, (b) quality appraisal process, and (c) analysis and synthesis approaches.

Source Material

- Researchers rely on descriptions of the policy/program context and implementation processes.
- Materials could include mixed methods or qualitative narrative data, infographics, tables, and frameworks.

Quality Appraisal

- Researchers assess the methodological strengths and limitations of the qualitative source material to draw conclusions about its rigor.

Analysis and Synthesis

- Researchers extract and synthesize qualitative data by using approaches like **thematic synthesis**, **framework synthesis**, and **meta-ethnography**.
 - **Thematic synthesis:** Researchers inductively develop descriptive themes by aggregating findings from across different studies.

- **Framework synthesis:** Researchers synthesize data against an existing conceptual framework, including by supporting or refuting the framework or by elaborating on aspects of the framework.
- **Meta-ethnography:** Researchers systematically interpret qualitative findings, comparing and contrasting them across the evidence base to produce “second order” and “third order” analytical findings.
- Researchers assess their confidence in the qualitative synthesized findings by using tools like **GRADE-CERQual**.
 - **GRADE-CERQual:** GRADE-CERQual is an approach for assessing how much confidence to place in the findings of a qualitative evidence synthesis. The overall assessment of confidence (high, moderate, low, very low) is based on the methodological limitations, coherence, adequacy, and relevance of the evidence.

Learn more: Visit [Cochrane](#) for more resources on QES!