Assessment of Methodological Limitations in Qualitative Evidence Synthesis
Pilot Test of a New Tool

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Objectives

There is no published tool to support assessment of qualitative evidence synthesis (QES). The objective of this poster is to present such a tool and the results from a feasibility test. The target audience is primarily guideline developers and authors of overviews of systematic reviews.

Methods

We have developed a tool based on the Tong et al, 2012 [1] framework for reporting the findings from QES. The tool focuses on risks influencing the confidence in the findings rather than the reporting. It is based on domains and supporting questions in analogy to tools such as ROB2 and QUADAS-2.

The items were discussed and refined with an expert in qualitative research as well as with several methodologists at SBU with experience conducting QES. The tool was pilot tested in an SBU overview on experiences and expectations of care for eating disorders [2].

Results

In the pilot overview 29 QES fulfilled the inclusion criteria and were assessed with the new tool. The external expert, who had not been involved in the development of the tool, found it easy to understand and to use.

However, two signalling questions were perceived as not supporting a risk assessment. These two signalling questions: A) whether the synthesis went beyond a summary of results of included studies and B) was the confidence in the finding assessed with GRADE-CERQual in an appropriate way, are currently being handled separately.

Tool to assess methodological limitations of qualitative evidence synthesis*

Author(s): _____ Year: _____

Title: _____ Reviewed by:

SUMMARY   Minor concern ☐   Moderate concern ☐   High concern ☐

INTRODUCTION	YES	NO	NO INFO
1. AIM: Was the research question clearly stated?	☐	☐	☐
2. SEARCH APPROACH: Was the approach to searching for the literature appropriate for the research question?	☐	☐	☐
3. INCLUSION CRITERIA: Were the inclusion/exclusion criteria clearly described?	☐	☐	☐
4. COMPETENCE: Were there a sufficient number of researchers involved in the synthesis who had adequate competence?	☐	☐	☐

COMMENT: _____

LITERATURE SEARCH AND SELECTION OF STUDIES	YES	NO	NO INFO
5. SEARCH STRATEGY: Was the search strategy sufficient to capture the relevant literature?	☐	☐	☐
6. STUDY SCREENING: Was the selection of relevant studies conducted independently by more than one reviewer and with consensus?	☐	☐	☐

COMMENT: _____

APPRAISAL AND SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS	YES	NO	NO INFO
7. APPRAISAL: Was risk of bias (or methodological quality) formally assessed using appropriate criteria?	☐	☐	☐
8. APPRAISAL PROCESS: Was the appraisal conducted independently by more than one reviewer and with consensus?	☐	☐	☐
9. SYNTHESIS: Was the synthesis method appropriate for the research question?	☐	☐	☐
10. SYNTHESIS: Was the synthesis conducted appropriately?	☐	☐	☐
11. SYNTHESIS OUTPUT: Were findings clearly grounded in the primary studies?	☐	☐	☐

COMMENT: _____

SUMMARIZE THE CONCERNS IDENTIFIED DURING THE ASSESSMENT
Minor concern ☐   Moderate concern ☐   High concern ☐
Reason for concern: _____

IF APPLICABLE...	YES	NO	NO INFO
A. SYNTHESIS OUTPUT: Did the synthesized result go beyond a summary of results from the included studies?	☐	☐	☐
B. CONFIDENCE IN FINDING: Was the confidence in the findings assessed with GRADE-CERQual in an appropriate way?	☐	☐	☐

* Tong A, Flemming K, McInnes E, Oliver S, Craig J. Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research: ENTREQ. BMC Med Res Methodol 2012;12:181.

Conclusions

This tool worked well and supported a rapid assessment of limitations. However, if the confidence of the QES should be formally assessed with GRADE-CERQual, an in-depth assessment including contacts with the authors of the QES will be necessary.

References
1. Tong A, Flemming K, McInnes E, Oliver S, Craig J. Enhancing transparency in reporting the synthesis of qualitative research: ENTREQ. BMC Med Res Methodol 2012;12:181.
2. SBU. [Eating disorder]. Stockholm: Swedish Agency for Health Technology Assessment and Assessment of Social Services (SBU); 2019. SBU report no 302. ISBN 978-91-88437-44-0.

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