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A Synopsis of Synthesis: A Review of Major and Savin-Baden's An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis

Christopher W. Smithmyer
Nova Southeastern University, cwsmithmyer@gmail.com

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Abstract

This review looks at the book *An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis: Managing the Information Explosion in Social Science Research*, by Claire Howell Major and Maggi Savin-Baden. Following the format for reviewing a book presented by the University of Alberta (2010), this review analyzes the book by audience, point by point, and then gives a general overview of the reviewer's opinion of the book. The book has several strong features, such as the procedural explanations and the clear defense of criticisms of synthesis, few failings, and presents a strong introduction for several audiences. Overall, this is a book well worth reading due to the strong content and the valuable procedures which Major and Savin-Baden provide.

Keywords

Meta-Ethnography, Meta-synthesis, Qualitative Research

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**A Synopsis of Synthesis:
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*An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis***

Christopher W. Smithmyer
Nova Southeastern University, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA

This review looks at the book *An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis: Managing the Information Explosion in Social Science Research*, by Claire Howell Major and Maggi Savin-Baden. Following the format for reviewing a book presented by the University of Alberta (2010), this review analyzes the book by audience, point by point, and then gives a general overview of the reviewer's opinion of the book. The book has several strong features, such as the procedural explanations and the clear defense of criticisms of synthesis, few failings, and presents a strong introduction for several audiences. Overall, this is a book well worth reading due to the strong content and the valuable procedures which Major and Savin-Baden provide. Key Words: Meta-Ethnography, Meta-synthesis, and Qualitative Research

Introduction

When Socrates was teaching his students in Ancient Greece, it may have been possible to have read every book written in the known world during a person's lifetime. Even during the time of the Renaissance, should one of the great thinkers have put his or her mind to it, perhaps all the published non-fiction work could have been read within a lifetime (Wolf, 1974). Now however, that is clearly not the case. Even before the advent of internet publishing, the quantity of published information has grown exponentially in size, and a researcher who is looking to exhaustively research a given topic has a momentous task on his or her hands. Qualitative synthesis is a process designed to ease the burden for social science researchers. Synthesis allows for members of the field to bring together disparate studies so that the information is localized in one accessible place. In their book, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis*, Claire Howell Major and Maggi Savin-Baden (2010) provide an introductory outline to the process which allows newcomers to the methodology to engage in research synthesis.

In *An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis*, Major and Savin-Baden (2010) focus on explaining the process of qualitative research synthesis (QRS) rather than just stating the steps. Further, their text strikes me as easier to comprehend than Sandelowski and Barroso's (2007) *Handbook for Synthesizing Qualitative Research*, the seminal text on the subject, which is written in context of the nursing field. Whereas Sandelowski and Barroso focus specifically on making the process more uniform for people already practicing QRS, Major and Savin-Baden give a detailed explanation on the very basics of QRS for newcomers to the methodology. This makes the book more readily accessible to practitioners, graduate students, and lecturers, thus broadening the

understanding of the methodology. Each step is covered in simple language, allowing the reader to not only grasp the process but also the transitions between the steps in the method.

Major and Savin-Baden (2010) seem to have a strong grasp of the process and an excellent ability to convey the complex procedures present in the QRS method in simplified terms. The authors acknowledge a propensity for studying innovative methods in research and education. This propensity seems to augment their support for the process in a positive way. While they provide ample review of the criticisms to the process of QRS, their responses to the criticism are well thought out and logically plausible, thus adding credibility to the text.

Audience

Major and Savin-Baden (2010) specify four audiences they have targeted in this book. These are professionals, students, lecturers, and policy makers. This book performs well as a handbook for professionals and lecturers. When a practitioner or lecturer has a question as to the specific process of QRS, she can simply turn to *An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis* and direct her attention to the relevant chapter, much like someone using a legal writing style would turn to the American Bar Association *Blue Book*. As a guide to students, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis* has strengths and weaknesses. While the text provides an excellent model for students who already know other qualitative methodologies, it can be a little obscure for those completely new to qualitative research, as the authors do not specifically explain the methodologies used in the data studies. As for policy makers, while the authors do explain the process of QRS they do not link the method to specific benefits to policy makers, limiting its usefulness to them. “[P]olicy makers can be better consumers of information if they have more knowledge of the processes involved in creating such a report...” (Major & Savin-Baden, p. 4). Overall, in terms of meeting the needs of the targeted audiences, this is an excellent book for professionals and lecturers, a strong book for advanced qualitative students, and a decent procedural handbook for policy makers who are given QRS reports on a daily basis.

Review of Chapters

An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis is broken up into three parts, each of which is comprised of several chapters. Part I, comprised of chapters 1 and 2, deals with the methodological validity of QRS as a research method. Part II, comprised of chapters 3 through 6, specifically breaks down each step of the method and explains the process for each step. Part III, comprised of resources, allows readers to see excerpts from QRS studies for reference when completing their own studies. Further, the chapters of *An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis* are augmented by a number of charts and tables which assist readers in visualization of the QRS method.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 is broken down into two parts. The first part looks at the arguments for QRS. In this part Major and Savin-Baden (2010) delineate ten specific reasons why QRS is a needed method in the qualitative research field. Subsets of these reasons vary from management of the information explosion, to identification of gaps in the research, and finally to how QRS benefits policy makers by making consumption of processed data more simple. Next, Major and Savin-Baden look at the criticisms against QRS and reply to them. Anyone who is looking to do a dissertation with a qualitative methodology would be well advised to read this section, as the defenses given to the criticisms are well designed to counter many of the general criticisms to qualitative research as well as specific criticisms to synthesis itself.

Chapter 2

While entitled “Comparing Qualitative Research Synthesis with Other Approaches,” Chapter 2 only briefly and broadly compares QRS with other research systems. Rather, chapter 2 gives a procedural theory background for the QRS process, before a brief comparison to critical synthesis. In this chapter, Major and Savin-Baden (2010) present additional strong arguments for the procedural validity of the QRS method. The chapter presents very clear visual aids in the form of Figures 2.1 and 2.2 (p. 24). These two figures present a succinct and easily understandable graphic of the levels of research applicability in a given area. Figure 2.1 presents a dialectic spectrum from the use of research as information to research as representation, with four phases in-between. Figure 2.2 compliments this by applying a triangular model for the focusing of research toward a QRS goal of full data synthesis. This breakdown provides an excellent avenue for beginning qualitative or QRS researchers to see the progression in validity and transferability across the qualitative spectrum.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 is the first substantive chapter which deals with the actual process of developing a QRS study. In this chapter Major and Savin-Baden (2010) specify six steps in the process of developing a QRS study. These steps are:

- 1) Formulate the Question
- 2) Identify Studies
- 3) Select a Sample of Studies
- 4) Appraise Studies
- 5) Finalize the Sample
- 6) Reflect upon the Process

Each level is discussed with detail on how to perform the basic functions of the process. Of special note are the appraisal of the studies and the reflection on the process phases. The information regarding the appraisal of the study phase gives a clearer picture of how to create inclusion and exclusion criteria for studies selected. This will allow researchers

to determine a clear criterion for the included studies. Further, the reflection on the process phase, a phase not included in the Sandelowski and Barroso (2007) model, helps the researcher to look back on the processes to eliminate any glaring errors that may have been overlooked. Chapter 3 not only provides a strong starting point for a QRS study, but the basic information on the creation of a research question is also useful in the development of other types of studies.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 looks at the process of analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting studies. These processes are vital functions of the method. Analyzing seems to involve summarizing; synthesizing includes analysis of data; and interpreting systems seems to be the synthesis of the studies' conclusions (Barroso, Gollop, Sandelowski, Maynell, Pearce, & Collins, 2003). The procedural elements of this section were very strong; however, the terminology seemed to be out of sync with the meaning and with other texts on synthesis. This was a small matter, though, as the authors explained the processes the terms specified very well.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 is a walkthrough of specific ideas which a researcher should look at to establish plausibility in a study. In what may be the strongest chapter in this fine book, Major and Savin-Baden (2010) start by explaining a list of features that could destroy the credibility of a qualitative or QRS study. Next, the authors describe in detail credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability as markers to the plausibility of a study. Further, after providing an easily readable chart on plausibility design, Major and Savin-Baden discuss the importance of analyzing the verisimilitude and criticality of studies used in the QRS. Rounding out the chapter, the authors discuss reflexivity, honesties, and integrity in regards to the studies used. When applied in context of the peer-review and cross-checking elements of analysis mentioned in the concluding part of the chapter, Major and Savin-Baden present a strong model of analysis for reviewing studies which make up the composite of the QRS report.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6, also a strong chapter, is useful to most writers as a guide to presentation. In Chapter 6 the authors look at the formatting of QRS findings in text. After a brief review of audience focus, the authors then explain a specific style for any paper written in QRS form. Then Major and Savin-Baden (2010) explain each section in detail and how to incorporate figures and charts into each section to make comprehension easier for the reader. In what is basically a mini-QRS writing course, the authors explain a uniform way in which authors can present QRS findings.

Resources Section

The resources section provides the general bibliography and two excerpts from the authors' QRS studies. Further, there is a QRS examples section to allow authors to see some of the subjects that have been covered by QRS papers. The excerpts from the authors' papers are useful in that they are broken down by section to provide an actual guideline of how to write each specific section. The choice to include a bibliography seems to compliment the topic and the theme, as this allows the reader to look further into the QRS process to increase his or her skills.

Overall Assessment

An Introduction to Qualitative Research Synthesis is an excellent book for those wanting to get into the methodology of synthesis or anyone who is doing a qualitative study in general. The arguments for using QRS are logical and convincing. This is further augmented by the author's arguments which are transferable to qualitative research in general. Many of the arguments made in this book can defend other types of qualitative studies, such as phenomenology, case studies, and ethnographies. Add to that the list of fatal factors in a qualitative research study, and a qualitative researcher has an excellent toolbox in this text.

While there are a few shortcomings of this book, such as the unclear terminology in Chapter 4 and the unconvincing applicability of the text to policy makers, the book as a whole is a strong text. Chapters 5 and 6 clearly outshine the minor flaws in Chapter 4 and the introduction. Upon completion of this book, the reader should have a strong understanding of the usefulness of QRS and the understanding of the method to allow them to design their own QRS study. This is a strong book and a good read for anyone who is interested in qualitative research synthesis.

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Authors Note

Christopher W. Smithmyer is an adjunct professor of Business and Criminal Justice at Everest University Ft. Lauderdale Campus. Holding an advanced law degree in business and dispute resolution, Professor Smithmyer focuses his work on unification of socio-economic knowledge, especially relating to transnational civil conflict. For comments or questions please email him at cwsmithmyer@gmail.com

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