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## **Synthesising (Beyond) Ethnographies – Meta-ethnography Revisited**

**Abstract:** Meta-ethnography is an interpretive knowledge synthesis used for synthesizing data from ethnographic studies. It compares and analyses metaphors/data, creating a new interpretation or developing a new theory. Meta-ethnography was originally introduced by Noblit and Hare in 1988, and in the past thirty-five years, acquired popularity in different disciplines. But by today's standards, the seminal text left stages of conducting meta-ethnography insufficiently described in terms of transparency and systematicity and being open to different interpretations. This paper aims to discuss and analyse seven phases of conducting meta-ethnography and to suggest how transparency and systematicity in each phase might be enhanced. The author acknowledges that meta-ethnography is still an evolving method and concludes that suggestions made in this paper may serve meta-ethnographers not as an anchor but as a compass in planning and executing each stage.

**Keywords:** meta-ethnography, metaphor, reciprocal translation, refutational synthesis, lines of argument, ethnography

### Introduction

Thirty-five years have almost passed since the publication of the “little blue book”. Noblit and Hare’s *Meta-ethnography: Synthesizing Qualitative Studies* appeared amidst the quantitative-qualitative quarrels when the latter was taking its rightful place within the research paradigm. Initially, the book went somehow under the radar. Only a year later, Harry Wolcott, an anthropologist, remarked at an American Educational Research Association meeting that non-anthropologists<sup>1</sup> were making claims about the term ethnography (Noblit 2018, 34). Without realising it at the time, Wolcott’s words had a prophetic impact as meta-ethnography established itself throughout the years well beyond the boundaries of social sciences.

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<sup>1</sup> George Noblit is a sociologist and his co-author Dwight Hare’s primary research interest was sociology of education and in qualitative research methods in evaluation and policy analysis.

Originally, meta-ethnography was devised for creating new interpretations by comparing and analysing published ethnographies whilst keeping the holistic perspective of each individual study. As Noblit and Hare (1988, 10) explained: “[m]eta-ethnography is a term we use to characterize our approach to synthesizing understanding from ethnographic accounts”. This can be done in three ways: 1) one study can be presented in metaphors of another (reciprocal synthesis), 2) studies can be pitted one against another so that one study can refute another (refutational synthesis) and 3) studies can be matched to one another by noting how one study complements and goes beyond another (lines of argument synthesis). Prefix *meta-* is reminiscent of another type of (quantitative) synthesis – a meta-analysis developed by Glass (1976). And Noblit and Hare (1988, 10–37) acknowledged it inspired them. But while meta-analysis aggregates data, meta-ethnography seeks to develop an inductive and interpretive synthesis. Thus, meta-ethnography is the qualitative counterpart to meta-analysis.

Currently, meta-ethnography is amongst the favourite qualitative methods of knowledge synthesis, not only in anthropology, ethnology and sociology but also in healthcare and education research. There is a booming growth of meta-ethnographies in different disciplines and one might even say that meta-ethnography is in its prime. However, diverse applications led to different modifications and adaptations of meta-ethnography, which raised the concern about standardization and routine application of this method. The issue is even more salient as the part of conducting meta-ethnography in the original text provides what by today’s standards could be called “bare-bones” instructions. Attention not given to systematicity and transparency left the seven phases of meta-ethnography open to different interpretations. On the positive side, this has resulted in novel methodological innovations which could raise the level of systematicity and transparency or be incorporated into future guidelines.

Hence, the aim of this paper is to revisit, elaborate and suggest an update and enhancements on the stages of conducting meta-ethnography in terms of more transparency and systematicity. Systematicity refers to the propensity towards an organized, orderly and methodical approach to synthesis that uses proper methods to search, screen, evaluate, analyse and interpret data to answer the review question. Transparency refers to the completeness with which the synthesis is expressed and whether all relevant aspects of design and application are clearly reported (Paré et al. 2016, 4–5). The author of this paper agrees with Campbell et al. (2011, 125), France et al. (2014, 6) and Noblit (2018) that meta-ethnography is still an evolving method and that standardized guidelines have yet to be written.<sup>2</sup> That is why, concurring with Paré et

<sup>2</sup> Noblit is fine with what meta-ethnographers do with the method as long as they know how to do it and stay close to the meaning of the canonical text (Nicolli 2016).

al. (2016), the author of this paper proposes systematicity and transparency, believing that these can be more flexibly applied by meta-ethnographers to fit the goals of specific meta-ethnographies. The present best practice and experience of various meta-ethnographies are more than useful in achieving the set purpose of this paper.

### Advantages and Potential Challenges

Meta-ethnography is a versatile method that can do several things: repudiate or re-examine established concepts, identify gaps in current research and generate new metaphors/concepts (which is perhaps its greatest advantage), provide a comprehensive overview of existing data, put findings from individual studies into much broader perspective, inform practice and enable evidence-based policy decision making (see Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 270–71; France et al. 2016, 2; Samnani et al. 2017, 638). It differs from other types of qualitative syntheses because it allows for the study of interrelatedness through a process that is consistent with the interpretative character of qualitative inquiry. The intention here is not necessarily to generalise<sup>3</sup>, but to discover and explore new aspects of what is already an in-depth original approach to ethnographic analysis (Kakos and Fritzsche 2017, 129).

Meta-ethnography is an evolving approach to synthesis and is gaining in popularity among different disciplines. It has huge potential to contribute evidence for policyholders and practice. But the challenge to enhance the level of transparency and systematicity remains. Diverse applications of this method throughout the years call for developing coherent reporting guidelines to ensure consistency of approach and reporting (France et al. 2014, 13; Cahill et al. 2018, 7; Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 271–72). Notwithstanding, these different applications resulted in innovation and methodological advancements, which could be integrated into future guidelines.

There is also a risk that meta-ethnography ends prematurely or results in abstract or isolated metaphors (Finfgeld-Connet 2014, 1588–89) and that arriving at conceptual innovation becomes impossible (Lee et al. 2014). Related to this, or the cause of this, is the tendency to substitute a traditional literature review designed for specific purposes with meta-ethnography and turn it into a separate paper. Instead of using meta-ethnography to reach genuine new interpreta-

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<sup>3</sup> Still, meta-ethnography allows for a certain degree of generalisability of qualitative data that stand-alone ethnographic studies lack. Generalisation usually includes translations of findings and analytical concept generalisation (Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 271).

tions, this renders it a shallow and technical exercise. The rapid proliferation of meta-ethnographies casts a doubt on the depth of analysis. Instead, meta-ethnographers may extract metaphors *prima facie* as common elements they have noticed across included studies and present them as original findings (Thorne 2015, 1347). Using checklists throughout the process and digging into the literature is a double-edged sword. On the one side, it may increase transparency and systematicity and on the other, as Thorne (2015, 1347–48) argued, it may lead to erroneous beliefs that synthesis is “bulletproof” if one demonstrated exhaustive literature search and ticks all the boxes in the checklist. Like in any qualitative research, synthesis is only one interpretation and different, even challenging, interpretations are possible. The subjective character of meta-ethnography lies in the selection of studies which may influence the representativeness of synthesis (Sattar et al. 2021, 12–13). For example, including irrelevant studies may decrease the effectiveness of meta-ethnography (Samnani et al. 2017, 638) or meta-ethnographers’ paradigmatic position could influence the literature appraisal and search strategy. For instance, some may prefer a comprehensive and systematic search, whilst others might decide to undertake an iterative and purposeful search (Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 271).

### Meta-ethnography Phase-by-Phase

Meta-ethnography takes on the iterative approach to review. This means that the process of question formulation, searching, selecting and determining how studies are (inter)related, translating and synthesising is characterised as recursive and dynamic rather than as a fixed one performed in a pre-defined and consecutive sequence of stages. In qualitative syntheses, a formal strict sequential approach can be a constraining and burdensome process (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006b, 9). Hence, a meta-ethnography is done through seven (overlapping and parallel) phases (Noblit and Hare 1988, 29).

**Phase 1:** Getting started. Noblit and Hare (1988, 26–7) briefly described this phase as formulating a review question and finding something worth synthesising. However, this phase needs further elaboration considering the following issues; A) rationale and the context for the meta-ethnography, B) aims and review question, C) rationale for using meta-ethnography and D) development of a “living protocol”.

A) Research at this early stage depends on the researcher’s experience in doing qualitative research, interest in the topic, and understanding of the existing body of literature. The characteristic of the previous studies determine what research question(s) are relevant and what is the most appropriate method for

synthesis (Paré et al. 2016, 6; Finlayson et al. 2008, 66). Hence, meta-ethnographers should first consider whether a meta-ethnography on a topic is needed<sup>4</sup> or if the existing meta-ethnography is out-of-date and needs an update<sup>5</sup> (France et al. 2019, 5; 2016, 2; Toye et al. 2014, 2–3). If the answer to one or both questions is affirmative, then meta-ethnographers should provide a reason for updating it<sup>6</sup>, outline the important question(s) that they will address, describe the gap in the existing research, and explain how new meta-ethnography informs, supplements, extends or enhances what we currently know in this area (France et al. 2019, 5; Toye et al. 2014, 3–4; Glenton et al. 2020, 7–8; Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 275). Meta-ethnographers should also describe the availability of qualitative data and the context of meta-ethnography (France et al. 2019, 5). Noyes et al. (2018) developed a framework on how to specify a context that might be useful to consult.

B) Meta-ethnography intends to enable more interpretive literature reviews, critical examination of multiple accounts of the phenomena, systematic comparison of case studies to draw conclusions and synthesis of ethnographic studies (Noblit and Hare 1988, 12–13). To do so, meta-ethnography goes beyond single accounts and “puts together” all available research to reveal analogies between them (Noblit and Hare 1988, 25). This might produce a new interpretation, a new model, a theory, or a conceptual framework. Hence, the aims of meta-ethnography should be associated and compatible with such intentions, although the aims might be redefined later on after examining available data and literature (Noblit and Hare 1988, 26; France et al. 2019, 5; Campbell et al. 2011; Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 275). The initial aims should be clearly stated, preferably in one sentence (Glenton et al. 2020, 8), and if changed, meta-ethnographers should give details (France et al. 2019, 5).

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<sup>4</sup> Synthesis is conducted to reduce “information anxiety” (Wurman 1989) associated with the ever-growing number of studies and to facilitate better summative knowledge (Sandelowski and Barroso 2007, 28).

<sup>5</sup> There are several reasons an update of the existing meta-ethnography might be warranted. For example, a high volume of new studies could contribute novel concepts to the original meta-ethnography. Or if the original meta-ethnography is of low quality, then an update could increase trustworthiness. If the aim of the original meta-ethnography was geographically and spatially bounded, then the original findings might be obsolete (France et al. 2016, 2–3). Failing to address the latter Noblit lists it as “a real failure of (...) [the] book”. Looking backwards 30 years, Noblit emphasises it is essential to consider and add context to synthesis such as time and place, geography, culture, etc. (Nicoll 2016).

<sup>6</sup> France et al. (2016, 5) identified three methods for updating existing meta-ethnography: 1) revising by adding and incorporating new articles, 2) doing a new synthesis of the new articles and comparing the findings to the original, 3) starting from “clean slate” by incorporating older articles with the newer ones to create an overreaching synthesis.

Pare et al. (2016, 7), France et al. (2019, 5), Finfgeld-Connet (2014, 1588) argue that the review question(s) should be explicitly formulated and related to the research aims right from the outset even if the review question is a “working question” that might require revision as in meta-ethnography. However, doing meta-ethnography is an iterative process and “[a]s one pursues this interest by reading qualitative studies, what is of interest undoubtedly changes. It may be modified, specified, or elaborated as one discovers new accounts” (Noblit and Hare 1988, 26–7). For meta-ethnography, it is not desirable to specify *a priori* the precise review question. Hence, an iterative approach proposed by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006a, 32; 2006b, 3) better suits meta-ethnography because it allows modifying the review question in response to search results and findings from studies. In meta-ethnography, as Eakin and Mykhalovskiy (2003, 190) propose, the review question should function more as a compass than as an anchor, and as something that is not precisely formulated until the end of the review.

C) There are many qualitative synthesis methods to choose from<sup>7</sup> (Pare et al. 2014; Rowe 2014; Barnett-Page and Thomas 2009). Meta-ethnographers should provide the reason they consider meta-ethnography as the most suited one (France et al. 2019, 6). For example, Noblit and Hare (1988, 26) mentioned conducting meta-ethnography on small numbers of studies, whereas Dixon-Woods et al. (2006a; 2006b) found meta-ethnography inadequate for a large number of studies using mixed methods. If the meta-ethnographers change or adapt<sup>8</sup> Noblit and Hare’s (1988) method, they should explain why they still considered meta-ethnography to be appropriate and describe all revisions<sup>9</sup> (France et al. 2019, 6; Toye et al. 2014, 3).

D) Some methods of synthesis, such as systematic literature review, require developing a rigorous protocol that specifies which studies will be included in synthesis and explicitly defines the literature search strategy, eligibility criteria, data extraction and analysis. The protocol developed in advance safeguards against biases (Torgerson 2003, 28–29; Purssell and McCrae 2020; Moher et al. 2015; Paré et al. 2016, 7). However, meta-ethnography is an interpretative and inductive review which aims at the development of theory and thus cannot use a protocol-driven approach (Atkins et al. 2008; France et al. 2019; Paré et al.

<sup>7</sup> Except meta-ethnography Barnett-Page and Thomas (2009) identified: grounded theory, thematic synthesis, textual narrative synthesis, meta-study, meta-narrative, critical interpretative synthesis and ecological triangulation. The number of methods is likely to increase.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Dixon-Woods et al. (2006a) modified it so much that they developed a new method, critical interpretative synthesis.

<sup>9</sup> Lee et al. (2015) graphically illustrated how seven phases of meta-ethnography were modified.

2016). Not that meta-ethnography should completely lack any rigour. Instead, the protocol should be conceived in more flexible terms as a “living protocol”. “Living protocol” is an evolving document that tracks research progress and any deviations from the original plan, adding to the transparency and systematicity (Paré et al. 2016, 7).

**Phase 2:** Deciding what is relevant to the initial interest. This phase involves A) searching and screening, B) selecting studies, and C) quality appraisal. Noblit and Hare (1988, 27) offer some general guidelines such as knowing who the targeted audience for the synthesis is, what they find credible and interesting, what accounts are available to address the audiences’ interest and what is meta-ethnographers’ interest in the effort. A) Searching can be comprehensive and systematic or iterative and purposeful or the combination of both (Cunningham et al. 2019; France et al. 2019, 7; Toye et al. 2014, 5; Greenhalgh et al. 2005, 420–21, Paré et al. 2016, 8). Each ethnography is unique as it describes and analyses aspects of a particular setting (Atkinson 1992, 29). Hence, Noblit and Hare (1988, 27–28) do not advocate a comprehensive literature search strategy since the purpose of meta-ethnography is not to summarise all available data but to learn from individually unique cases (Doyle 2003, 327–31). Hence, an exhaustive search and inclusion of numerous studies can be cumbersome and unnecessary<sup>10</sup> (Toye et al. 2014, 4–5; Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 275–76; Dixon-Woods et al. 2006a, 33–34; 2006b, 3). Although a purposeful and iterative search during which researchers learn more about the topic is better suited for meta-ethnography, researchers should decide on a case-by-case basis and explain their decision (France et al. 2019, 7; Rowe 2014; Greenhalgh et al. 2005). Ethnographic research takes time and is frequently published in book or monograph form and relying solely on electronic databases is discouraged. Thus, the search strategy should start with library catalogues, citation chaining, and contacting the experts (Noblit and Hare 1988, 27; Booth 2016, 16; Atkins et al. 2008, 3) and only after that extend to electronic databases<sup>11</sup> and hand searching (Booth 2016, 16; Atkins et al. 2008, 3). Toye et al. (2014) did not find it nec-

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<sup>10</sup> Although Noblit and Hare (1988) originally included 2–6 studies, what amounts as enough varies (see Dixon-Woods et al. 2007; Hannes and Macaitis 2012). For example, Campbell et al. (2003, 673) included 10 studies, Doyle (2003, 330) and Britten et al. (2002) included 4 studies, Pound et al. (2005) included 37 sociological and medical studies, Hess Rice (2002) included 20 studies, Schumm et al. (2010) included 14 studies, Tondeur et al. (2012) included 23 studies. Campbell et al. (2011, 35) suggest that the maximum number of studies should not exceed 40.

<sup>11</sup> Searching electronic databases should start with domestic databases doiSerbia, SCIndeks, and Hrčak, and then continue with Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest, ERIH PLUS, PsycInfo and the Social Science Citation.

essary to search grey literature and dissertations because of the sheer volume of results.<sup>12</sup> The search should stop once “theoretical saturation” is reached i.e. when new studies do not add more insight (Paré et al. 2016, 8; Toye et al. 2014, 5). In short, the search strategy should be transparent, include sufficient details about the search and be reproducible by independent meta-ethnographers (Paré et al. 2016, 8; Schumm et al. 2010, 337; Campbell et al. 2011, 34).

B) Selecting studies. Qualitative synthesis aims for variation in concepts rather than an exhaustive sample (Glenton et al. 2020, 15) Thus, decisions on which studies to select should be based on which of them provide the most fruitful data (Doyle 2003, 327) or “the most opportunity to learn” (Stake 2000, 446). Hence, a favourite method is purposive sampling, which may involve maximum variation in data (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 233; Doyle 2003, 328; Campbell et al. 2011; Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 276; Glenton et al. 2020, 15). Doyle (2003) enhanced study selection by establishing boundary conditions for case requirements. According to Doyle (2003, 329–30) only those studies that can withstand tight scrutiny should be selected. This means that each study has to be more than mere description and involve interpretation and analysis that stem from established theories and methods. Established theories and methods are those that are most cited and well-accepted. Another important criterion for selection is the duration of an ethnographic study. Although there is no agreement on what makes up long enough, a number of 180 days or more could be acceptable.<sup>13</sup> Studies that do not explicitly describe methods should be excluded. However, if it is difficult to assess the quality of a study because of poorly described methods, meta-ethnographers should err on the side of caution and opt for an inclusive policy to avoid omitting potentially valuable contributions to the synthesis (Atkins et al. 2008, 4). Meta-ethnographers should also take into consideration studies that go beyond existing models and understandings. This may include: “studies (...) which provided the greatest insight or challenge to the idea of interest generated, studies that didn’t fulfil a particular aspect of the inclusion criteria (...) but could provide a significant insight to the area of interest, studies that have provided a review of the constructs and ideas in question (...) and other forms of evidence (...) that explain processes, models or theories in greater detail” (Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 276–77). Although Noblit and Hare (1988) do not exclude multiple cases, Doyle (2003, 329) suggests limiting meta-ethnography to single cases as multiple cases could add to the already high level of complexity in meta-ethnography. For the sake of transparency and sys-

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<sup>12</sup> For the sake of transparency and systematicity, meta-ethnographers should state if they anticipate that they will identify a large number of studies (Glenton et al. 2020, 15).

<sup>13</sup> This number is well-accepted for educational ethnographies but it may also serve as an orientation when considering the duration of primary ethnographic research.

tematicity, it is not advisable to select studies arbitrarily like Britten et al. (2002, 212) did. To ensure transparency and systematicity meta-ethnographers should justify any inclusion or exclusion in relation to the focus and review question (Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 277; France et al. 2019, 7). Meta-ethnographers should save and make available on demand a list of eligible studies (those that met eligibility criteria) and sampled studies (studies included in the synthesis) (Glenton et al. 2020, 15). Some meta-ethnographers (Pound et al. 2005, 135; Schumm et al. 2010, 337; Tondeur 2012; Campbell et al. 2003, 674) found it useful and recommend referring to the Critical Appraisals Skills Programme checklist (CASP) (2018).<sup>14</sup>

C) Quality appraisal. Original authors are silent on this issue (Noblit and Hare 1988). Thus, some meta-ethnographers are divided on the question of quality appraisal and whether it should form a part of meta-ethnography at all (Atkins et al. 2008, 5). Others found quality appraisal useful during searching and screening, and have eliminated methodologically weak studies (Campbell et al. 2003; Doyle 2003). However, rigorous quality assessment can be counter-productive because some good studies may not meet quality criteria and studies that appear good at screening may not pass the quality assessment (Atkins et al. 2008, 5). However, “weak” is not clearly defined and since in qualitative research there is no hierarchy of study designs, the conventional “hierarchy of evidence” approach cannot be applied. Hence, as a guideline, a low-quality threshold should be applied to maximise the inclusion of studies (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006a, 33; 2006b, 4). For example, Tondeur et al. (2012, 136), and Atkins et al. (2008, 5) did not exclude any studies based on quality appraisal (such as those in which the research question and purpose were not clearly formulated) as those studies still provided contributions to the synthesis. Although qualitative syntheses may benefit from appraising the quality of studies, quality assessment for interpretive syntheses such as meta-ethnography is not as crucial as it is for its aggregative counterparts (Paré 2016, 10).

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<sup>14</sup> See <https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/>

CASP is popular in qualitative research (Carter et al. 2018). However, using appraisal checklists is always a problem for qualitative synthesis (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006a; 2006b; 2007). CASP can contribute to the poor inter-meta-ethnographer agreement (Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 278). Hannes et al. (2010, 6) identified that CASP can't evaluate interpretive or theoretical validity. Garip and Yardley (2011, 114) found that CASP criteria did not affect the contribution of studies to meta-ethnography.

While welcoming innovations such as search procedures, quality appraisal and so on, Noblit (2018, 39) cautions that using checklists “based on good methodology and research procedures need to be justified on the basis that they are not excluding on genre rather than quality”.

**Phase 3:** Reading the studies. This phase involves careful re-reading of selected studies and becoming familiar with the content and details (see Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 279; Atkins et al. 2008, 6; Britten et al. 2002, 2011; Toye 2014, 7). The focus should be on identifying and extracting emerging “metaphors”, concepts and/or themes (Noblit and Hare 1988, 39). As Noblit and Hare (1988, 28) originally described this phase “... it is best to identify this phase as the repeated reading of the accounts and the noting of interpretive metaphors. Meta-ethnography is the synthesis of texts; this requires extensive attention to the details in the accounts, and what they tell you about your substantive concerns”. Synthesis in meta-ethnography, as is with other qualitative research, develops during the synthesizing process and thus this phase cannot be clearly demarcated from other phases. Although this is listed and described as a separate phase, the reading is *pars pro toto* of meta-ethnography. As the meta-ethnographers remarked to each other: “... it’s completely bizarre to have [reading] as a particular phase (...) because (...) that’s what you do all the way through” (Lee et al. 2014, 341). At this stage it is important to decide what data to extract and how to do this (Toye 2014, 7) Hence, to decide easier, meta-ethnographers could employ active and multi-layered re-readings as this approach focuses on the details. At different points, reading could be set with different purposes: to assess, familiarise, extract, organise, record, compare, relate, stimulate, map and verify. To realise these purposes, a meta-ethnographer could keep a journal documenting moving between analysis and synthesis (Doyle 2013, 331) or use techniques such as listing, tabulating, annotating and coding could be employed (Lee et al. 2014, 341–43).

To further enhance this phase in terms of transparency and systematicity, meta-ethnographers should describe: 1) the process and strategy for reading studies: who participated in it and how close critical reading was achieved; 2) the strategy for extracting data and who was involved in it, and was the process conducted independently by meta-ethnographers and was data checked for accuracy; 3) identifying main concepts, metaphors or themes (France et al. 2019, 7; 2014, 10). Some authors suggest including two (or more) meta-ethnographers could further enhance quality at this stage (Soundy and Heneghan 2020, 279; Cunningham et al. 2019, 15; Lee et al. 2014, 343; Paré et al. 2016, 11). As a general rule to secure internal reproducibility, qualitative analysis requires storing data in structured formats such as tables, lists of metaphors and themes (Paré et al. 2016, 11; France et al. 2019, 7).

**Phase 4:** Determining how the studies are related. To determine how the studies are related, Noblit and Hare (1988, 28) suggest a) creating a list of the key metaphors, phrases, ideas and/or concepts used in each study, b) juxtaposing them, and afterwards c) making an initial assumption about the relationship

between them. They also gave examples of how they listed metaphors (Noblit and Hare 1988, 41, 44, 50, 53, 55–7, 66–7) but did not provide any guidelines. Hence, some meta-ethnographers used a list of key metaphors and concepts (Campbell et al. 2011; Pope and Popay, 2007; McCann et al. 2013; Campbell et al. 2003), while others preferred diagrams (Malpass et al. 2009; Campbell et al. 2011; 2003) grids and tables for comparison between metaphors (Malpass et al. 2009; Britten et al. 2002; Erasmus 2014; Atkins et al. 2008) and even hand-written lists of metaphors from each study with hand drawn lines between related metaphors (Campbell et al. 2011; 2003). It is fundamental to meta-ethnography to first identify and describe key metaphors and concepts (phase 3) and then to translate and compare them. By metaphor, Noblit and Hare (1988, 14) refer to “... the themes, perspectives, organizers, and/or concepts revealed by qualitative studies”. Toye et al. (2014, 7) further describe metaphor/concepts as a “meaningful idea that develops by comparing particular instances”. Essentially, metaphors should explain and not only describe. However, it can be sometimes difficult to use identified metaphors and meta-ethnographers may find it appropriate to generate arch metaphors (Noblit and Hare 1988, 33; Toye et al. 2014, 7). This is sometimes required to explain the inter-connect-edness of identified metaphors/concepts (Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 279; Cahill et al. 2018, 6).

At this stage, it is important to distinguish between the order of data. Schütz’s (1982) concept of first and second-degree constructs are used in meta-ethnography to distinguish between the data. According to Schütz (1982, 5–7), first-degree constructs are an individual’s common sense and their interpretations of the world, and second-degree constructs are ethnographers’ interpretations based on the first-degree constructs. Accordingly, the data of meta-ethnography, i.e., identified metaphors, are second-order constructs which are further abstracted to develop third-order constructs—a meta-ethnographers’ interpretation of the original ethnographic studies. Synthesis in meta-ethnography requires some level of abstraction (Noblit and Hare 1988, 33) but whenever possible, meta-ethnographers should base their synthesis on second-order constructs i.e., using the original language from studies (Toye et al. 2014, 7; Britten et al. 2002, 211; Doyle 2003).

Transparency and systematicity could be increased by describing how studies are related to each other, to the research question, and do they relate reciprocally or reputationally. “Disconfirming cases” i.e., cases in which one or more metaphors differ from other studies, should also explain (France et al. 2019, 8). During identifying key metaphors, a meta-ethnographer might encounter an untranslatable metaphor (Noblit and Hare 1988, 76). Untranslatable metaphors should not be included in the analysis but should be noted documented and reported separately.

**Phase 5:** Translating the studies into one another. The process of translation is idiomatic and focuses on translating the meaning of texts to keep a holistic perspective and preserve the original meaning (Noblit and Hare 1988, 76; Campbell et al. 2011, 10). This is reminiscent of how Atkinson (1990, 57) described the representation of reality in primary ethnographic research: "... there is a process of translation and transcription that goes through several stages". Translations should enable readers to see different interpretations of the phenomena (Noblit and Hare 1988, 29). As such, they are audience-sensitive. Proper translation maintains key metaphors in each study in relation to other key metaphors (Noblit and Hare 1988, 28). The constant comparative analysis is used for comparing metaphors from one study to another.

Noblit and Hare (1988, 38–74) identified three types of translations and consequent synthesis. Noblit (2018, 38) later explained that these are not mutually exclusive types and that, for example, a reciprocal translation could be part of lines of arguments, etc.

1. Reciprocal translations as synthesis – is undertaken when studies are about similar things and when each study can be translated into the metaphors of others and conversely.
2. Refutational synthesis – is used when studies refute each other. It is more complex, as it requires translating ethnographic accounts and refutations.
3. Lines of argument synthesis or inference – is used to put pieces together and see the whole picture. This involves a two-pronged approach: 1) meta-ethnographic synthesis of the studies and "clinical inference"<sup>15</sup> about the whole line of argument, and 2) grounded theorizing (especially the constant comparative method).<sup>16</sup>

However, Noblit and Hare (1988) did not provide clear instructions on how to conduct translations, leaving this process open to different approaches. For

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<sup>15</sup> Lines of argument follow what Geertz (1973, 26) described as clinical inference: "Rather than beginning with a set of observations and attempting to subsume them under a governing law, such inference begins with a set of (presumptive) signifiers and attempts to place them within an intelligible frame. Likewise, the goal of lines of argument is to make whole from parts (Noblit and Hare 1988, 63).

<sup>16</sup> Clinical inference along with grounded theorizing makes the basis for lines of argument synthesis. From Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory, Noblit and Hare (1988) adopted "the constant comparative method" that meta-ethnographers use to develop an "integrating scheme". The integrating scheme is delineated through a constant comparative method. Delimiting occurs on three levels:

The theory solidifies by requiring fewer major modifications to include new data  
Reduction in the initial list of categories (metaphors)

Theoretical saturation – new incidents and comparisons do not yield new data (Glaser and Strauss 1967, 110–11).

example, Atkins et al. (2008, 7), Schumm et al. (2010, 338) and Tondeur et al. (2012, 136) arranged studies chronologically, while Campbell et al. (2003, 674) recommended starting with a landmark study or “index paper” and then proceeding chronologically. Toye et al. (2014, 9) did not arrange studies in any order, seeing it difficult for 77 accounts. Remaining true to the original authors’ position<sup>17</sup>, Doyle (2003) argued that translations should not only be rich in detail but capable of telling believable and useable stories to readers. Hence, Doyle (2003, 332–33) operationalized translations as writing a “descriptive narrative” and searching for “salient language” through analysis. How studies are ordered and compared may affect the synthesis and presently, there is no evidence on which of these methods works best (France 2019, 9; 2014). Chronological ordering may be appropriate for numerous studies covering a large timeframe and “descriptive narratives” may be useful for a small (4–8) number of studies. However, since there are no guidelines, meta-ethnographers should decide on a case-by-case basis.

In terms of systematicity, transparency and audience sensitivity, meta-ethnographers should find their place in the text and explain it to the readers (Doyle 2003, 331), or as Paré et al. (2016, 7) and Glenton et al. (2020) called it, “researchers’ reflexivity”. They should also state who was involved in translation, describe how metaphors were translated from one study to another, specify how the context was preserved during translation, specify positionality (i.e., research subjects, original authors or meta-ethnographers), and describe how alternative interpretations were considered. Meta-ethnographers should also document which metaphors from selected studies they used as their own (France 2019, 8–9).

**Phase 6: Synthesizing translations.** In the seminal text, this stage is simply defined as making a whole from parts (Noblit and Hare 1988, 28) and was left open to meta-ethnographers who mostly understood it as a juxtaposing metaphor-to-metaphor and comparing translations. However, a more detailed account of the synthesis Noblit (2018) offers some thirty years after. First Noblit (Nicoll 2016; Noblit 2018, 37) lamented that instead of the synthesis of the findings, he should have used the term “storylines” to show how synthesis can uncover what is not apparent in the stand-alone studies. While the meta-ethnographer’s choice of metaphors can illustrate storylines, Noblit sees the usual practice of metaphor-to-metaphor synthesis as reductionist (Nicoll 2016). Translating and synthesising full storylines is more complex and time-consuming, but it is worth the effort because such translations reveal unacknowledged stories and make fuller use of the interpretations, resulting in a more complete synthesis (Nicoll

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<sup>17</sup> Noblit and Hare (1988, 29) asserted: “... any effort to communicate the synthesis involves some assessment of the audience (...) to achieve a synthesis, the translations must be rendered in the audience’s particular language”.

2016; Noblit 2018; 37–8). Hence, the synthesis may result in new interpretations but may also open new questions that are not contained in the included studies (Noblit 2018, 37).

Meta-ethnography, notably in phases 5 and 6, draws on Turner's (1980) *Sociological Explanation as Translation*. Meta-ethnographers are satisfied with identifying how the metaphors/concepts are similar or different across studies. But in Noblit's (2018, 38) view, this is a simplistic understanding of a more complex and richer process of synthesis. Hence, to better clarify it, Noblit (2018, 38) cites Turner according to whom synthesis is "... setting, rejecting, and replacing puzzles, as well as examples of the kinds of grounds and considerations..." (Turner 1980, 57). This is a three-pronged process that involves: 1) identifying the puzzle, 2) examining the surrounding customs, practices, and circumstances; and 3) describing them as "game variations", or analogies (Turner 1980, 57; Noblit 2018, 38).

Transparency and systematicity of qualitative synthesized data require a spectrum of techniques for evaluating the evidence and establishing its implications in addressing the research question (Paré et al. 2016, 12). Hence, to increase the trustworthiness of the synthesis, meta-ethnographers could take the following steps: A) Positionality. Atkinson's (1992, 29–37) suggestion to ethnographers about writing in "genre" and style of a targeted audience applies to meta-ethnographers as well. Meta-ethnographers should clarify their position in the text and allow for different positions and, therefore, interpretations (see Doyle 2003, 336–38; Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 281–82). B) ensuring consistency through keeping extensive documentation and audit trail. All data for meta-ethnography should be available to the public on demand, and the audit trail should demonstrate how the synthesis developed. Meta-ethnographers should indicate in which included studies a reader can find raw, uninterpreted, data (see Doyle 2003, 336–38). C) Member checking is another technique that enhances credibility. Meta-ethnographers should submit a draft of the synthesis to the original authors of each included study and ask them to check for accuracy and resonance with their studies and do they find the interpretation credible (see Doyle 2003, 336–38; Soundy and Heneghan 2022, 281–82; Britten et al. 2002, 214–15; Smith and McGannon 2017, 103).

**Phase 7:** Expressing the synthesis. This phase is about presenting and publishing results. How to do that depends, again, on the targeted audience. Thus, for an academic audience, meta-ethnography should be presented in a peer-reviewed journal, but Noblit and Hare (1988, 29) are open to different forms such as "videos, plays, art and music". Toye et al. (2014, 11–12) published results on film (uploaded on YouTube). Atkins et al. (2008, 8) published the findings in a leading scientific journal but raised the concern of how to make those fin-

dings intelligible to practitioners and policymakers. Britten et al. (2002, 213) published it in a journal but stated who the addressed audience is. Since there is no *One* way to express and disseminate synthesis, meta-ethnographers should consider who the intended audience is. Or, as Cunningham et al. (2011, 11) suggested: “[s]ome understanding of the audience’s culture is therefore required to ensure that the translation of studies for the synthesis uses intelligible concepts to inform the final presentation of synthesis”.

Ultimately, the aim of meta-ethnography is to produce a conceptual innovation/new interpretation. But it is noteworthy that sometimes this may not be the case. Unfortunately, this becomes clear only in the middle of the process when meta-ethnographers have already spent considerable time and effort. The chief “culprits” are studies in which metaphors/categories are “thin” or underdeveloped and thus ill-suited for interpretive synthesis. This is where the suggestion from phase 3 to have another pair of eyes come in handy, as other meta-ethnographers could suggest alternative research question or realise that conceptual innovation is not possible (Lee et al. 2014, 343).

## Concluding Remarks

Even at thirty-five years old, meta-ethnography is still an evolving method preferred in social sciences, healthcare and educational research. Its popularity is growing, but its application reveals potential challenges that were not sufficiently addressed in the seminal text. These mostly have to do with enhancing the level of transparency and systematicity of each of the seven phases of the process. Drawing on an array of existing meta-ethnographies that, alongside synthesis, brought novelties and methodological innovations to each phase, the author attempted to update and enhance each step of the process in terms of better transparency and systematicity which may ultimately add to increased trustworthiness. However, because there is no agreed-upon guide that standardises the entire procedure, the author’s suggestions may serve meta-ethnographers as a compass for the planning and execution of each phase. Practice makes it perfect. And as an evolving approach to knowledge synthesis, the future practice of conducting meta-ethnographies will continue to inform the how-to of the seven stages of meta-ethnography.

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### *Sintetizovanje etnografija – propitivanje meta-etnografije*

Metaetnografija je interpretativni postupak koji služi za sintezu podataka iz etnografskih studija. Uspoređuje i analizira metafore/podatke, stvarajući novu interpretaciju ili razvijajući novu teoriju. Meta-etnografiju su kao postupak predložili Noblit i Hare 1988, a u proteklih trideset i pet godina stekla je popularnost u različitim disciplinama. Za današnje standarde, temeljni tekst ostavio je faze provođenja meta-etnografije nedovoljno opisane u smislu transparentnosti i sustavnosti te otvorene za različita tumačenja. Ovaj rad ima za cilj raspraviti i analizirati sedam faza provođenja meta-etnografije i predložiti kako se transparentnost i sustavnost u svakoj fazi mogu poboljšati. Autor priznaje da je meta-etnografija još uvijek metoda koja se razvija i zaključuje da prijedlozi izneseni u ovom radu mogu poslužiti meta-etnografima ne kao sidro, već kao kompas u planiranju i provedbi svake faze.

*Ključne riječi:* meta-etnografija, metafora, uzajamni prijevod, pobijajuća sinteza, argumentacija, etnografija

### *Synthèse des ethnographies – questionnement de la méta-ethnographie*

La méta-ethnographie est un procédé interprétatif qui sert à faire la synthèse des données des études ethnographiques. Elle compare et analyse les métaphores/les données, créant une nouvelle interprétation ou développant une nouvelle théorie. La méta-ethnographie a été proposée comme procédé par Noblit et Hare en 1988, et elle a dans les trente cinq dernières années gagné en popularité dans différentes disciplines. Pour les standards actuels le texte fondamental a insuffisamment décrit les phases de la mise en application de la méta-ethnogra-

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phie au sens de la transparence et de la systématique et qui ainsi restent ouvertes à différentes interprétations. Ce travail a pour l'objectif de discuter et d'analyser les sept phases de mise en application de la méta-ethnographie et de proposer les manières dont la transparence et la systématique dans chacune des phases peuvent être améliorées. L'auteur reconnaît que la méta-ethnographie est une méthode en train de se développer et conclut que les propositions exposées dans ce travail peuvent servir aux méta-ethnographes non pas comme une ancre mais comme une boussole dans la planification et la mise en application de chaque phase.

*Mots clés:* méta-ethnographie, métaphore, traduction réciproque, synthèse réfutative, argumentation, ethnographie

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