

## **Meta-Ethnography and its Potential for Theory Building in Library and Information Science**

*Nancy Everhart, Melissa P. Johnston*

### **Abstract**

Meta-ethnography is an interpretive method that provides a way to synthesize the findings of two or more qualitative studies concerning a similar research question or topic. Going beyond the traditional literature review, which looks at individual studies, meta-ethnography facilitates generalizations through extracting concepts, metaphors, and themes. This paper provides a thorough description of the seven steps of meta-ethnography as defined by Noblit and Hare (1988). Implications for this method and the field of Library and Information Science (LIS), especially in the area of theory building, are discussed. Appropriate examples of actual and potential applications within LIS and related disciplines are given to illustrate the potential for the meta-ethnographic method.

### **1 Introduction**

The discipline of Library and Information studies is principally defined as a social science, and ethnography is employed for social understanding (Bawden, 2012). Meta-ethnography, a method developed by George W. Noblit and R. Dwight Hare (1988), enables researchers to understand and synthesize the findings of two or more qualitative studies concerning a similar research question or topic. Mike Weed (2005) has described meta-ethnography as a form of meta-interpretation. Going beyond the traditional literature review, which looks at individual studies, meta-ethnography facilitates generalizations through extracting concepts, metaphors, and themes (Burns, 1989).

Meta-ethnography is interpretive rather than aggregative, with the goal being to “produce new interpretations of the primary study author’s interpretations (e.g., themes, concepts or metaphors) of the research participants’ experiences in published primary qualitative studies” (France *et al.*, 2014, 4). Also, unique to

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meta-ethnography is the systematic analysis process designed to preserve the context and meanings of the primary studies through utilizing translation, which is “the process through which data are synthesised - it involves continuously comparing the meaning of the concepts from all the primary studies to reach a full understanding of the issues” (France *et al.*, 4). Noblit and Hare (1988, 28) described it as “making a whole into something more than the parts alone imply” or going beyond the findings of any individual study.

## 2 Implications of the Method for Library and Information Science

As qualitative research has been increasing over the past three decades, particularly in top-ranked Library and Information Science journals (e.g., Agosto *et al.*, 2007; Chu, 2015; Hider and Pymm, 2008), meta-ethnography can provide a useful method for synthesizing this research for new understandings. Some have noted that as a discipline we need to make better use of existing research evidence, instead of conducting yet more small-scale studies (Urquhart, 2011). Library and information science (LIS) has been criticized for a lack of dialogue, a tendency to develop new models - rather than test the transferability of existing models, confusion over the paradigms used, and using a narrow lens to examine a problem (Bates, 2007; Dervin, Reinhard, and Shen, 2006). Meta-ethnography, by reconceptualizing and synthesizing existing research, “compels us to acknowledge the uniqueness of individual cases, but also the uniqueness of collectives” (Urquhart, 2011, 38).

There have also been multiple calls for theory development in the field of LIS (e.g., Julien, Pecoskie, and Reed, 2011; Kim and Jeong, 2006; Kumasi, Charbonneau, and Walster, 2013; McKechnie and Pettigrew, 2002; Pettigrew and McKechnie 2001). A theoretical foundation helps define a discipline and is necessary “for framing research problems, building arguments, and interpreting empirical results” (Pettigrew and McKetchnie, 2001, 62). Assembling the findings of multiple primary studies using a systematic process, such as meta-ethnography, can help generate comprehensive and generalizable theory. Wasif Afzal (2006, 23) argues that there has been an overuse of surveys and questionnaires in LIS, which are “snapshots of behavior that do not lead to a general theory”. Meta-ethnography leads to an in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon as it addresses problems from various dimensions across multiple studies. By exploring these dimensions, it could contribute to the theoretical foundations of our discipline (Afzal, 2006).

*With meta-synthesis (a form of meta-ethnography) there is much more emphasis on compare and contrast, exploration of the theoretical assumptions and their implications and the quality of the research evidence is considered carefully. Above all, meta-synthesis is a rigorous approach to critique and analysis of the research evidence. Meta-synthesis may be used to identify the research gaps, to provide a deeper understanding of a problem area, with a systematic approach to producing explanations. The main benefit of meta-synthesis is that the ‘whole’ picture provided by meta-synthesis should be greater than the ‘sum of the parts’. New knowledge — whether on theory, methodology, or data analysis and integration — should emerge.*

(Urquhart, 2011, 37)

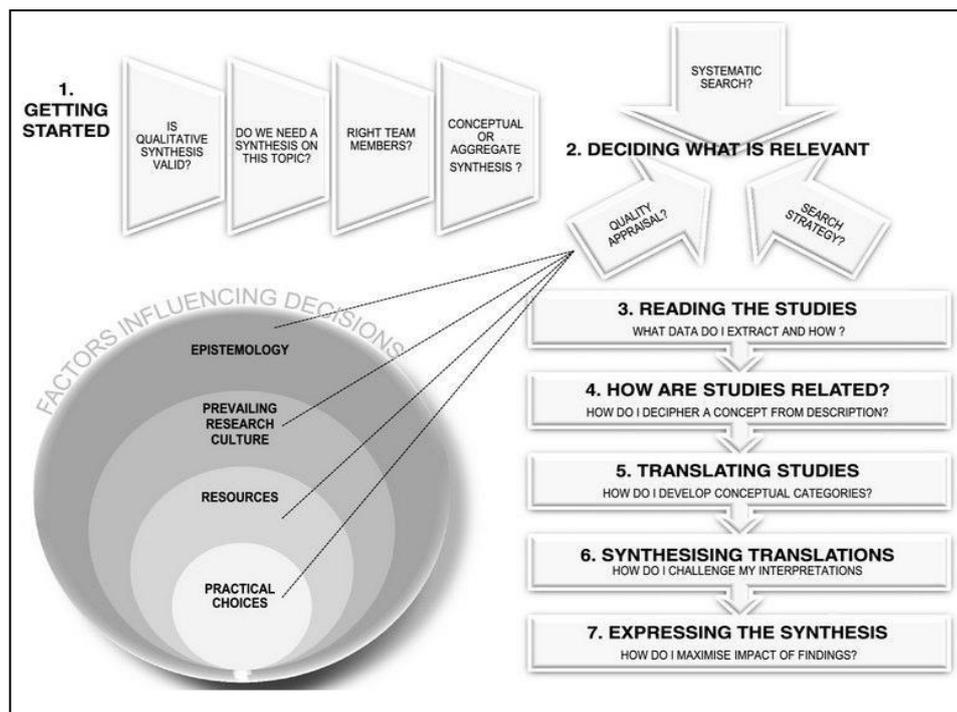
It has been posited that since only the high quality data are analyzed in a meta-ethnography, it can lead to conclusions on the effectiveness of an intervention and the creation of new understandings (Bawden, 2012; Urquhart, 2011). This is an extremely valuable application of the method for LIS because “unfortunately, randomised controlled trials are not appropriate for answering many of the questions that arise in information behaviour” (Urquhart, 2011, 40).

Jonathan Lomas (as cited in Shelbe, 2016) pointed to the development of data repositories over a decade ago as a resource in extending synthesis approaches to incorporate viewpoints of a wider spectrum of stakeholders. The increase of university research repositories makes a wide range of unique historical, as well as original, research broadly available in LIS, which can function as sources for meta-ethnography studies.

Meta-ethnography also has implications for research teams. The method is richer when multiple researchers bring various perspectives to the process of reading, summarizing, and bridging summaries. This leads to resulting products that are logical, deductive rationalizations, sound conclusions, and to calls for further research (Doyle, 2003; Toye *et al.*, 2014). Meta-ethnography extends borders by allowing researchers to communicate across fields, which is important in an interdisciplinary and multi-faceted field like LIS. Meacham (1998, 405) argues that today’s educational issues and problems cannot be studied in an isolated and homogeneous manner; researchers from multiple disciplines need to be “brought together simultaneously”. Norman Lincoln and Yvonna Denzin (2000) even suggest that researchers can enhance translations by including the voices of those researched to seek new interpretations. Additionally, when researchers enhance their translations with rich detail and the language of participants, they raise, not mute, the voices of those who are researched.

### **3 Description of the Method**

Noblit and Hare (1988) provide a seven-step process for conducting a meta-ethnography: Getting Started; Reading the Studies; How are the Studies Related; Translating the Studies; Synthesizing Translations; and Expressing Synthesis (see Figure 1). This method begins with the research idea and takes the researcher through to expressing the findings. Each step is described in detail below. The steps are not necessarily discrete, but rather are part of an iterative research process (Toye *et al.*, 2014).



**Figure 1: Stages of meta-ethnography (Toye et al., 2014).**

### 3.1 Step 1: Getting Started

*A meta-ethnography starts, like all inquiries, with an interest in some setting, topic, argument, issue, controversy or opportunity. This interest, for interpretivists, need not be overly specific. Often it starts simply from seeing what different qualitative researchers have to say about something and being concerned with how to compare their accounts*

(Noblit and Hare, 1988, 3).

In this step it is important to consider if research synthesis fits the purpose of the inquiry, is synthesis of the topic needed, and what experience or knowledge do the researchers need (Toye *et al.*, 2014).

### 3.2 Step 2: Deciding What Is Relevant to the Initial Interest

The scope of a meta-ethnographic study will often be more restricted than that of many narrative reviews, which is perfectly acceptable. In their 1988 guide, Noblit and Hare note that examining two to six studies is commonplace; meta-ethnography has no defined sampling procedure. Unlike meta-analysis, meta-ethnography does not attempt to summarize the entire body of available literature on a topic.

*Meta-ethnography focuses on conceptual insight, and including too many studies might make conceptual analysis 'unwieldy' or make it difficult to maintain insight or sufficient familiarity*

(Toye *et al.*, 2014, 17).

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Researchers must focus on relevant studies by determining inclusion and exclusion criteria. Factors in deciding what studies are relevant involves knowing who the audience for the synthesis is, what is credible and interesting to them, what accounts are available to address the audience's interests, and what the researchers' interests are in the effort (Noblit and Hare, 1988).

Meta ethnography provides an "alternative to traditional aggregative methods of synthesis. It is a method that involves induction and interpretation of the studies...it aims to synthesise" (Britten *et al.*, 2002, 2102). Yet, it is important that the interpretations of the original researcher are used, then the focus on meaning in context of the original study is retained. When researchers bring together many different interpretations, common themes and differences can be discovered and new interpretations can be built (Schreiber, Crooks, and Stern, 1997).

### **3.3 Step 3: Reading the studies**

This step of meta-ethnography "involves thoroughly reading and rereading the studies to identify and describe the concepts. This requires extensive attention to the details in the accounts" (Noblit and Hare, 1988, 28). Yet, repeated reading continues throughout all phases of meta-ethnography, which allows for immersion in the data where new discoveries may emerge.

### **3.4 Step 4: Determining How the Studies Are Related**

In the next phase the researcher determines the relationships between the different studies by looking across the different studies for common and recurring concepts. Noblit and Hare (1988) recommend creating a list of metaphors, phrases, ideas and/or concepts (and their relations), and juxtaposing them. There are many qualitative techniques that can be utilized for extracting concepts from the studies, such as memoing, coding, concept mapping, or diagramming. A common technique utilized in this step is to create a grid to see how the concepts relate to each other (Britten *et al.*, 2002). Schütz's (1962) concept of first- and second-order constructs is frequently used in meta-ethnography studies to extricate the data of meta-ethnography. First-order constructs are the everyday understandings of ordinary people and second-order constructs are the researcher's interpretations based on first-order constructs. The data of meta-ethnography are the second-order constructs (Britten *et al.*, 2002; Campbell *et al.*, 2011; Toyle *et al.*, 2014), which have been defined as discovering a "whole in a set of parts" by Noblit and Hare (1988, 16).

### **3.5 Step 5: Translating the Studies into Each Other**

The next step in meta-ethnography is to determine how the second order constructs are related to each other by "sorting concepts into conceptual categories or 'piles' that shared meaning, thus translating studies into one another" (Toye *et al.*, 2014, 31). A core element of meta-ethnography is translation, which means that the interpretations of studies are "translated into one another" (Noblit and Hare, 1988, 11). This translation requires the organization of the concepts by looking for similarities and difference between concepts and allows the researcher to understand and transfer concepts across multiple studies (Toye *et al.*, 2014). This process of categorization using constant comparison is integral to qualitative

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research. Translations can either be “literal, word for word, translations or they can be idiomatic translations, in which the meaning of the text is preserved” (Britten *et al.*, 2002, 210). It is this step of translating the studies that distinguishes meta-ethnography from more traditional methods of literature review (Britten *et al.*, 2002).

### 3.6 Step 6: Synthesizing Translations

The next step in meta-ethnography is to make sense of the categories that emerged from the translations. It is in this step where the second-order constructs are further abstracted to develop third-order constructs or the researcher’s interpretations of the original authors’ interpretations are developed. Third order interpretations are derived from first and second order constructs reported in the primary studies (e.g., Atkins *et al.*, 2008; Britten *et al.*, 2002; Campbell *et al.*, 2011). Third-order interpretations can be developed through synthesis with the aim of producing new interpretive context.

Synthesizing translations is an on-going process where findings are further abstracted to form a conceptual framework. Noblit and Hare (1988) suggest three ways of synthesizing translations:

*Refutational syntheses (where findings contradict each other), reciprocal syntheses (where findings are directly comparable); findings are taken together and interpreted as a line of argument*

(Noblit and Hare, 1988, 36)

Noblit and Hare (1988, 38) describe the process of translating findings into each other going something like, “one case [or study] is like another, except that ...”. This synthesis of studies 1 and 2 would then be compared with study 3 in the same way. “Then the synthesis of [studies] 1, 2 and 3 would be compared with [study] 4, and so on until all the studies...had been translated into each other” (Campbell *et al.*, 2011, 57). Another possible method of translation is refutational, where the studies are synthesized to see if any of the findings from the studies refuted each other. In the lines-of-argument synthesis, the studies are analysed thematically and this “involves a process of interpretation and conceptual advancement or third-order interpretations” (Campbell *et al.*, 2011, 64). This type of synthesis says something about the whole based on studies of the parts. To conduct the synthesis, Noblit and Hare’s recommend (1988) creating a list of metaphors, phrases, ideas, and/or concepts and their relationships (see Table 1). Fleshing out concepts and building these interpretations grounded in the findings of the separate studies is in line with the constant comparative method of grounded theory work (Watson *et al.*, 2008).

Meta-ethnography “is an interpretive form of knowledge synthesis which aims to develop new conceptual understandings. This process is iterative and utilises an on-going form of knowledge production,” (Toye *et al.*, 2014, 35) therefore the constructed third-order interpretations can serve as theoretical underpinnings (Noblit and Hare, 1988).

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### 3.7 Step 7: Expressing the Synthesis

The final phase of meta-ethnography is expressing the synthesis or the reporting of the research findings (e.g., Britten *et al.*, 2002; Campbell *et al.*, 2011; France *et al.*, 2014; Toye *et al.*, 2014). Noblit and Hare (1988) emphasized the importance of “tailoring meta-ethnography reports to their intended audience” for effective dissemination to maximize impact (France *et al.*, 2014, 51). The needs of the audience influence both the form and substance of the synthesis. Expressing the synthesis can take many forms, including publication, videos, infographics, or a conceptual model. Potential audiences may include researchers, practitioners, and policy makers (Britten *et al.*, 2002).

## 4 Meta-ethnography in Library and Information Science

Laura Sheble (2016) recently echoed the thoughts of Hjørland (2001) from over a decade ago that research synthesis has been neglected in LIS literature. Exceptions include LIS communities associated with health and medical information, and the evidence-based practice movement. Meta-ethnography has firm roots in the medical field. It has been used to analyze a myriad of topics including musculoskeletal pain (Toye, et. al, 2014); psychological distress (Hoy, 2012); cervical cancer screening (Canty, 2016); and diabetes (Campbell *et al.*, 2003) among many others. Sheble’s (2016) study of the use of research synthesis methods revealed that approximately 80% of research synthesis publications appear in 20% of LIS titles. Sheble presents a detailed comparison of the differences in the steps in conducting research synthesis and a meta-ethnography, asserting that meta-ethnography is a more developed and interpretive approach. Keeping the defined differences in mind that differentiate research synthesis from meta-ethnography, the number of applications of meta-ethnography in LIS is virtually non-existent.

Although a few researchers have maintained that meta-analysis has the potential to make substantive contributions in LIS research (Afzal, 2006, Ankem, 2005; Bawden, 2012; Hjørland, 2001; Shelbe, 2016; Urquhart, 2011) there had not been a study in LIS that applied a meta-ethnographic approach as formulated by Noblit and Hare (1988) until recently (Everhart and Johnston, 2016). This research provides an example of how meta-ethnography can be applied for theory building in LIS. Meta-ethnography proved to be a rigorous and robust method to develop a conceptual model of school librarian leadership based on six studies that were relevant to the topic. The meta-ethnography method allowed for the identification of key concepts and the initial explanation of their interdependence. This resulted in five key propositions towards a theory of school librarian leadership which can be seen in Table 1.

The concepts and propositions derived from the meta-ethnographic exercise developed into a conceptual model (see Figure 3) to express the synthesis. Phase one of developing a conceptual model begins with conceptual development, which requires the formulation of “initial ideas in a way that depicts current, best, most informed understanding and explanation of the phenomenon, issue, or problem in the relevant world context”(Lynham, 2002, 231).

Focus of Studies	Concepts	Second-Order Interpretations	Third-Order Interpretations	Propositions
Developing a leadership curriculum (Everhart and Dresang, 2007)	Resistance: to professionally defined leadership roles; to broadly and boldly sharing knowledge; from technology coordinators	School librarians value leadership advice from those inside the profession rather than those from outside.	School librarian leadership is more traditional than transformational.	Education can provide a leadership skill set to bolster confidence for the growth of school librarian leadership.
Impact of school librarian preparation programs on leadership development (Smith, 2009)	Growth: via formalized processes, personal exploration, and dedication	Technology can be a vehicle for building confidence and leadership skills.	School librarian leadership can be taught to some degree but individual and school characteristics influence the extent that leadership can be exerted.	Peers contribute to school librarian leadership growth.
Leadership of National Board Certified School Librarians (Everhart, Mardis and Johnston, 2011)	Relationships: with peers, teachers, students, and principals	Relationships with others impact leadership enactment.	School librarian leadership develops more comfortably and successfully with peers.	School librarian leadership growth requires a specific mind-set.
Enablers and barriers to technology leadership (Johnston, 2012)	Communication: within and beyond the school and the professional communities; face to face and electronic	School librarians are hesitant to share their expertise beyond their school buildings.	School librarian leadership requires a mind-set.	School librarian leadership engagement follows traditional leadership patterns and is resistant to forms of leadership that require taking risks.
School-wide leadership for the first-year school librarian (Mardis and Everhart, 2014)	Confidence: acquired via education in leadership skills and strategies, and via personal use and expertise with technology			
Leadership in the adoption of digital textbooks (Kang, 2015)				

**Table 1: Results of a Meta-Ethnographic Study of School Librarian Leadership.**

*The output of this phase is an explicit, informed, conceptual framework that often takes the form of a model and/or metaphor that is developed from the theorist's knowledge of and experience with the phenomenon, issue, or problem concerned.*

(Lynham, 2002, 232).

The output for this first phase of theory building is a research-informed conceptual model (Lynham, 2002). Our model is based on flexible conceptual terms rather than rigid theoretical variables and causal relations, and can, therefore, be modified with the evolution of school librarian leadership or as a result of new research. Our Conceptual Model of School Librarian Leadership aims to help educators understand the phenomenon of school librarian leadership rather than to predict it (Everhart and Johnston, 2016).

## 5 Conclusion

The need for theoretical foundations for research in the Library and Information Science (LIS) field is well documented (Grover and Glazier, 1986; Hjørland, 1998; Julien and Duggan, 2000; Julien *et al.*, 2011; Leckie, Given, and Buschman, 2010; McKechnie and Pettigrew, 2002; Pettigrew and McKechnie, 2001). Theory is “an important element for establishing the identity of LIS” (Kim and Jeong, 2006, 549) and yet there has been little attention paid to theory in the literature of the field and even a decline in theory use and development (Julien and O'Brien 2014; Kim and Jeong, 2006). This decline in theory development may represent a trend in LIS research to utilize “existing theory rather than to generate new theories” (Kim and Jeong, 2006, 559).

Our utilization of meta-ethnography for theory building in LIS provides a model and proof in concept for other researchers. Use of synthesis methods such as meta-ethnography “is an important development for library and information science researchers and practitioners because it has affected how researchers in other fields interact with literature, data, and information infrastructures” (Sheble, 2016, 1990). Opportunities arise from “undiscovered public knowledge” (Swanson, 1986, 104) and the ability to synthesize across research studies for the purpose of contributing to theory development (Glaser and Strauss, 1971; Grover and Glazier, 1986).

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