QUALITY STANDARDS FOR META-NARRATIVE REVIEWS (for funders/commissioners of research)

1. The research problem

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Is the research topic is appropriate for a meta-narrative approach?	Research topic: • Is not appropriate for secondary research; and/or • Does not require understanding of how a topic has been conceptualised and studied differently by different groups.	Research topic: • Is appropriate for secondary research. • Would benefit from illumination of how a topic has been conceptualised and studied differently by different groups.	Adequate plus: Framing of the research topic reflects a thorough understanding of the value, importance and implications of different approaches on research practice and findings.	Good plus: There is a coherent argument as to why a meta-narrative review is more appropriate for the topic than potential alternatives.
Is the research question is constructed in such a way as to be suitable for a meta-narrative review?	• The research question is not structured to reflect the elements of meta-narrative explanation.	The research question includes a focus on how a topic has been conceptualised and studied differently by different groups.	Adequate plus: The research question includes an element that addresses the implications of different conceptualisations and approaches to a topic on research findings.	Good plus: The research question is a model of clarity and as simple as possible.

2. Understanding and applying the purpose and underpinning principles of meta-narrative reviews

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Does the review team demonstrate an understanding and application of the purpose and principles underpinning a meta-narrative review?	Significant misunderstandings of purpose and principles underpinning a meta-narrative review.	Some misunderstandings of purpose and principles underpinning a meta-narrative review, but the overall planned approach is consistent enough that a recognisable set of distinct meta-narratives together with a higher-order synthesis of these is likely to results from the process.	• The review's assumptions and planned analytic approach are consistent with the purpose and underpinning principles of a meta-narrative review. • The philosophical position is explicitly constructivist. • A sufficient range of paradigms/epistemic traditions is likely to be included for sense-making and use made of contrasts between these as higher-order data.	Good plus: Review methods, strategies or innovations planned to address problems or difficulties within the review are philosophically coherent and make a clear and illuminative contribution to the knowledge base on the topic area.

3. Focussing the review

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Is, or will, the review question be	• The review question is too broad	Attempts will be made by the review	Adequate plus:	Good plus:

| sufficiently and appropriately focussed? | to be answerable within the time and resources allocated.

• There is no evidence that progressive focussing will occur as the review progresses. | team to progressively focus the review topic in a way that takes account of the priorities of the review and the realities of time and resource constraints. | • The focussing process will be iterative and reflexive.

• Commissioners of the review will be involved in decision-making about focussing. | The review team will draw on external stakeholder expertise to drive the focussing process in order to achieve maximal end-user relevance. |

4. Scoping the literature

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Has sufficient and appropriate scoping of the literature been planned?	The planned scoping of the literature appears to be limited and cursory.	Attempts will be made to utilise a broad range of relevant sources and to build as comprehensive a map as possible of the research traditions on the topic.	Adequate plus: A coherent and through search strategy will be used, deliberately including exploratory methods such as browsing and will be modified in the light of emerging findings.	Good plus: Systematic use will be made of experts and stakeholders in identifying research/epistemic traditions.

5. Developing a search strategy

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Is the proposed search process such that it would identify data to enable the review team to develop and refine the map of seminal papers and primary research studies?	The planned search is incapable of supporting the development of a rigorous meta-narrative review.	The proposed searches will: • Be driven by the objectives and focus of the review. • Be piloted and refined. • Seek out documents from a wide range of sources likely to contain relevant data on research traditions. • Not be restricted by study or documentation type.	Adequate plus: Further searches will be undertaken in light of greater understanding of the topic area, particularly through the use of citation-tracking of seminal papers.	As for 'Good'

6. Selection and appraisal of documents

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Will the selection and appraisal process ensure that sources relevant to the review containing material likely to help identify, develop and refine understanding of research traditions be included?	• The selection and appraisal process will not support a rigorous and complete meta-narrative review.	Selection of a document for inclusion into the review will: • Be based on what it can contribute to making sense of research traditions. • Accurately include all the key high-quality sources identified and exclude the poor-quality ones.	Adequate plus: During the appraisal process studies in the separate traditions will be appraised using the quality criteria acceptable to that tradition.	As for 'Good'

7. Data extraction

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Will the data extraction process capture the necessary data to enable a meta-narrative review?	The data extraction process will not capture the necessary data to enable a meta-narrative review.	Data extraction processes will: • Focus on identification and elucidation of data that informs how research on a topic unfolded over time in a particular tradition. • Be Piloted and refined where appropriate. • Include quality control processes to ensure uniformity of processes and standards.	Adequate plus: Data extraction processes will: • Support later processes of analysis (e.g. by organising data into sets relevant for later analysis). • Be comprehensive enough to identify important topics that concern a research tradition.	Good plus: The data extraction process will be continually refined as the review progresses, so as to capture relevant data as the review question is focussed and/or research traditions identified and elucidated.

8. Synthesis phase

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Will synthesis of the meta-narratives include discussion and explanation of the philosophical, conceptual, methodological and empirical differences between traditions?	A synthesis phase: • Is not planned, or • Is planned in such a way that it fails to engage with the underlying philosophical, conceptual or theoretical contrasts between traditions.	The planned synthesis phase will attempt to show how different groups of researchers produced different findings as a result of different philosophical assumptions, ways of conceptualising the topic, theoretical explanations or study designs and methods.	Adequate plus: Contrasting accounts of different traditions will be sought out and synthesised in a way that generates robust higher-order data.	As for 'Good'

9. Reporting

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Will the review team use the items listed in the RAMESES Reporting standard for meta-narrative reviews when reporting their meta-narrative review?	No information provided	RAMESES Reporting standard for meta-narrative reviews will be used for reporting.	Adequate plus: Firm commitment made to adhere to all items within the RAMESES Reporting standard for meta-narrative reviews.	As for 'Good'

For details on how these quality standards were developed, please see:
Wong G, Greenhalgh T, Westhorp G, Pawson R..Development of methodological guidance, publication standards and training materials for realist and meta-narrative reviews: the RAMESES (Realist And Meta-narrative Evidence Syntheses - Evolving Standards) project. Health Serv Deliv Res 2014;2(30)