In response to “Brimful of STARLITE”

I appreciate Andrew Booth’s effort to promote standards for reporting the findings of systematic reviews of qualitative research [1]. Yet, several of our papers were erroneously considered in Booth’s work. These papers (references 61, 83, and 84 in the Booth paper) were not formal metasyntheses and were focused on methods for such reviews, rather than results. These papers were misrepresented in the STARLITE analysis as they were not reports of studies but rather methodological papers on how to do them, as indicated in each of these papers.

Booth also overlooks a key issue facing authors of such reviews: editors and publishers decide what to include in such reports and have their own standards for tailoring reports to their audiences. For example, we have been told not to include lists of papers or details of search terms, databases, and related material to conserve space. Authors are then compelled to limit the information provided in reports and make this additional detail available on request. In addition, it may be seen as duplicate publication to repeat details of a search when two or more synthesis reports are written from the same data set.

Booth and others interested in such issues may wish to read two publications that address them further [2, 3].

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Author’s reply

Margarete Sandelowski raises important issues about the author’s paper [1]. As study search coordinator for the Cochrane Collaboration Qualitative Research Methods Group, I regularly encounter the practicalities implied by her first comment—that is, difficulties of classification. Some papers are unequivocally theoretical methods papers; others conclusively present the results of qualitative systematic reviews. In a third type, exemplified by the paper with reference number 61, authors illustrate methodological aspects with reference to a specific review (indicated by “on motherhood in HIV-positive women” in reference 61’s title).

I contend that such papers share the requirement to explicitly report search methodology. As Sandelowski acknowledges, readers’ interpretation of papers is shaped by their “preferences and expectations” as readers [2]. The papers with reference numbers 83 and 84 were not included in my analysis (Table 1) and were appropriately listed in my table of excluded papers (Table 2). In so far as she interpreted Table 2 (“Other Qualitative Systematic Reviews Excluded for Not Reporting Search Methods”) as only identifying full qualitative systematic reviews, when some are papers associated with qualitative systematic review projects, I accept my caption was potentially confusing.

Sandelowski’s second point about editorial constraints on descriptions of methods is well made but lies beyond the scope of my study, which reported a phenomenon rather than explaining it. At a seminar on “Enhancing the Qual- ity of Trials and Other Research (EQUATOR)” in May 2006, developers of reporting statements including Consolidated Standards of Reporting Trials (CONSORT) (clinical trials) and Quality Of Reporting Of Meta-analyses (QUOROM) identified a wide range of stakeholders including librarians, my target audience, and researchers, authors, editors, publishers, and funders. All groups need to be more aware of the need for completeness of reporting. It is encouraging to note that supplementary methodological materials are increasingly available via Web-based publishing models.

Finally, I, too, would recommend Sandelowski’s book, especially her chapter on “Searching for and Retrieving Qualitative Research Reports” [2], a thorough treatment of the conduct of retrieval methods. I note, however, that this chapter bases the validity of syntheses on comprehensiveness of literature searches. Commentators on qualitative systematic review methodology, myself included [3, 4], are focusing instead on sampling appropriateness and methodological transparency. Such debates will clearly continue to contribute to the literature.

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