Picking other people's flowers and destroying their gardens?

About conducting a brilliant literary review as a qualitative researcher in a reflective modern and constructivist world

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Content

Abstract

Conducting a literature review in qualitative research serves as an essential introduction for young researchers, familiarising them with new methods and theoretical frameworks. A quality literature review requires a systematic approach, clear documentation, and adherence to established standards to ensure reproducibility and comprehensive coverage. These reviews can be systematic, semi-systematic or integrative, each serving different purposes and using different methods. Effective reviews reflect the research process, from problem formulation to data analysis, and ensure thorough and reproducible results. Literature reviews play a crucial role in stabilising existing paradigms by reinforcing dominant theories and methodologies. Drawing on Kuhn's concept of paradigms and Bourdieu's social field theory, reviews function as symbolic acts that perpetuate distinctions within the academic field, validating established frameworks and contributing to the

accumulation of symbolic capital. This process makes it difficult for new paradigms to emerge. However, by critically evaluating existing literature and highlighting anomalies, reviews can also pave the way for paradigm shifts, balancing the maintenance of the status quo with the potential for scholarly innovation. The act of conducting a literature review can be likened to taking individual flowers from a beautifully arranged garden, creating a stunning bouquet but potentially leaving a trail of destruction in the original landscape.

Literary Reviews: A scientific art?

Conducting a literature review on reviewing literacy might seem odd at first, but from a constructivist perspective, it is the best way to perform an ethnographic 'going native' into the field of qualitative research. During the socialisation into the field of academic practise, the literature review serves as an introduction to the field for young researchers and as a preliminary step for any research project, helping to familiarise them with new fields, methods, or theoretical frameworks. In order to be somewhat systematic and reproducible, there must be rudimentary documentation and standards to follow. (De Montfort University, Leicester 2008, 7; Dixon-Woods 2011, 331; Flick 2023, 137; Hart 2011, 29; Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey 2012, 24; Paré et al. 2015, 183; Randolph 2019, 6, 2019, 2).

By definition, *"a literary review is the selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data and evidence written from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated, and the effective evaluation of these documents in relation to the research being proposed."* (Hart 2011, 13)

Dixon-Woods (Dixon-Woods 2011, 331) begins by describing two different extreme positions or approaches to writing a literary review in the social sciences: the 'authorship' approach and the 'contractual' approach. The first refers to the process of socialisation into the field, the skills required are learned step by step from consultants, one needs methodological as well as tactical skills. Hart (1999) also argues that before one becomes a 'scholar', one must immerse oneself in the very literature from which one claims to draw and within which one positions one's work, and that 'good scholarship' is only possible if a researcher can critically synthesise his or her research focus and methods. Socialisation into the field, discipline or methodological framework is a factor that many others also emphasise (Brendel et al.; Flick 2023, 139; Jesson et al. 2012, 24). As the academic field is structured by the forces between different actors, in particular by the different amounts of accumulated power (aka capital) they have personally and qua institutions they represent (Bourdieu 2018, 213).

However, literary reviews are also a standard procedure in academic work and the start of almost all articles, it gives the pillars of the perspectives to the researched phenomena's and sets the paradigmatic, methodological and theoretical framing for the following paper or book. (Clark, Foster, and Bryman 2019, 88–95). The more procedural approach, which conceals any social practice in the field, is called 'contractual'. A systematically conducted and canonically defined process with explicit and shared rules shifts the focus to transparency, accountability, and execution. (Dixon-Woods 2011, 331) Using a rule set externalises the scholarly honesty from the researcher to the method.

From a typological perspective, most authors describe a dichotomy between systematic and non-systematic types of reviews (Kraus et al. 2022, 2581), with

systematic approaches being associated with a more 'scientific', 'correct' and 'modern' flavour. Snyder (Snyder 2019, 334) distinguishes between (1) systematic, (2) semi-systematic and (3) integrative literature reviews with different purposes, research questions and contributions to the scientific community. While systematic approaches need a specific research question and use qualitative articles to get evidence of an effect or inform policy and practice, semi-systematic approaches are in use for broad research questions and us qualitative as well as quantitative methods. Their contributions are often something like the state of knowledge at a given time, themes in literature, historical overviews, a research agenda or theoretical models. Integrative approaches can be used for narrow and broad research questions. They are qualitative and provide taxonomies or classifications, or a theoretical model or framework. Most journals today require a systematic and methodologically structured approach - the procedural approach.

Based on different foci, there are three different centres that a review can have: domain, theory and method, with many publications requiring combinations of these (Kraus et al. 2022; Randolph 2019, 3–4). On the basis of four different overarching aims of reviews, Paré et al. (Paré et al. 2015, 186) distinguish between nine different types of theory. To summarise prior knowledge, there are (1) narrative reviews, (2) descriptive reviews and (3) scoping reviews. Data aggregation or integration can be achieved by (4) meta-analysis, (5) qualitative systematic review or (6) umbrella review. For the construction of explanations, there are the (7) theoretical review and the (8) realist review, and for the critical evaluation of existing literature there is the (9) critical review. Other systematic typologies have different approaches. (Boote and Beile 2005, 8; Grant and Booth 2009, 94–95; Guy Paré and Spyros Kitsiou 2016, 173; Jesson et al. 2012, 15; Randolph 2019, 8–10)

Methodical approaches: the stairway to heaven?

The process of writing a literary review is almost the same as the whole research process: it starts with formulating the problem, which is a clear strategy for including and excluding sources, data collection, data evaluation, analysis and interpretation, and presentation to the public. Database searches will provide only part of the relevant data; references should then be used to extend the dataset. Data extraction into a coding book should be standardised to ensure the reproducibility of results. Often the data extraction will be modified at this stage as additional concepts need to be included, so it is an iterative process. After this step, the researcher begins to "make sense" of the collected data, to combine it, to synthesise knowledge and to decide for the presentation what to publish and what to leave out. (Hervard 2007, 2; McCombes. 2023; Randolph 2019, 6; Yonis Amina 2023)

Hart suggests starting with reviewing monographies for the core concepts of the field, before going into journal articles. The third step should be theses and conference papers (aka "grey literature) to get to the latest developments. (Hart 2011, 35). Searching the literature is essential and it starts with proper search terms, good search phrases and then - after finding relevant central sources by using references forward and backward to find connected sources. (Clark et al. 2019, 72–75; Schoormann et al. 2018; Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller, and Wilderom 2013, 48–49)

The Cochrane movement has promoted a hugely influential methodology that might be termed the 'rationalist' model of systematic review, other canonised approaches like the New York Centre for Reviews and Dissemination and many more do also publish common standards for conduction and synthesis of reviews for different academic disciplines. (Davis et al. 2014, 3; Dixon-Woods et al. 2006, 29; Page et al. 2021)

The main concept of qualitative searches are different to quantitative searches that can be defined as searching strategies that rely heavily on electronic databases searching a very large amount of literature, producing a search of the surface discourse of the literature as mediated by those outside the profession (Furlong and Lester 2023, 674; Mackay 2007, 237). At the beginning of qualitative research there was a discussion, if starting from known position would change the perspective too much, but in times of ending the "all in one" theoretical concepts for the whole society But the situation is completely different, 60 years later (Flick 2023, 137; Ramalho et al. 2015, 2). Theoretical saturation, which is an integral part of qualitative methodology - somehow as a "stop" sign or a way out - does not seem to meet the criteria for systematic reviews because of a lack of reproducibility and explicitness. (Dixon-Woods et al. 2006, 37). It seems to be complicated to do qualitative literary reviews, but there are some different methodological strategies for it (Dixon-Woods 2011, 331; Furlong and Lester 2023, 674; Mackay 2007, 237; Wolfswinkel et al. 2013, 48–49).

Brilliance as a quality of literature reviews

The concept of brilliance is complicated to adopt on scholarly work, so let's try to start like Adorno (Tiedemann and Adorno 2008) with a negation of the thesis, as Randolf (Randolph 2019, 1) mentioned: "writing a faulty literature review is one of many ways to derail a dissertation". Thus, it is evident that the quality of a literature review is important, but what aspects differentiate good reviews from bad ones? "Good" research is good because it advances our collective understanding (Boote and Beile 2005, 3). But: as every review represents the standpoint of the reviewer, there is nothing like a perfect review (Hart 2011, 25). Good literature reviews must demonstrate both depth and rigour, with a clear strategy for selecting articles and

capturing insights, going beyond merely summarising previous research They should be replicable, useful for scholars and practitioners, and evaluated against specific standards depending on the type of review (systematic, semi-systematic, or integrative), while ensuring comprehensive coverage of relevant research fields. (Snyder 2019, 338)

Brilliance in writing a literary review can be seen as a combined measure of quality in terms of systematic approach, necessary breadth to see the scope of the topic, completeness in the sense that nothing of relevance is missing, conciseness and, finally, a language appropriate to the topic as well as to the academic field. Or in simple alliteration: it should be concise, clear, critical, convincing, and contributively. (Callahan 2014, 273–274; Kraus et al. 2022, 2579; McCombes. 2023).

A five-dimensional quantitative quality assessment for literature reviews was presented by Boote and Beile (Boote and Beile 2005, 7; Randolph 2019, 11): (1) Coverage, (2) Synthesis, which also assesses the understanding of the subject area, historical context, vocabulary, themes and phenomena, and the new perspective on the literature. (3) Methodology: This measures whether the review identifies the most important methods and places them in a meaningful context. (34 Significance measures the extent to which the review addresses the practical importance of the topic and the scientific significance. Finally, (5) Rhetoric measures the coherent and clear structure.

Scholarly practise as symbolic act to perpetuate distinction

A literature review has three purposes depending on the authors and the target audience: demonstrating knowledge of the academic field, informing about relevant authors and researchers, and serving as a publishable scholarly document (Dixon-Woods 2011, 331; Paré et al. 2015, 183; Randolph 2019, 2). The double symbolic

reference in the tradition of Bourdieu's field-theory (Bourdieu 1993, 2018) is interesting. If one wants to argue from an external ethnographical perspective, one could say that on the one hand, the apprentice shows his symbolic willingness to enter the academic field through his knowledge, and on the other hand, there is a reference to orthodoxy in the field with the greatest influence, a kind of ritual bow to the high priests. This symbolism allows for a kind of introductory cleansing ritual at the beginning of any academic work, making the brain clear and focused on the paradigmatic narrowness of the field defined by orthodoxy. This is a quasi-religious act, like kneeling, taking holy water or lighting a censer in a temple. Bourdieu (Bourdieu 2018) would mention, that the quality of the review is being recognised better by the orthodoxy of the field, the far more it is according to the rules of the specific academic field. But is that enough for brilliance?

Thomas Kuhn's seminal work, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions," (Kuhn 1996) introduces the concept of paradigms as frameworks consisting of accepted theories (Brad Wray 2011; Kuhn 1996), methods, and standards that guide scientific research within a community. Kuhn posits that during periods of "normal science," researchers operate within these paradigms, solving puzzles that reinforce the existing framework. Paradigms are stabilised through shared commitments among community members, facilitating consensus and communication. The system of Science, Kuhn is describing can be seen as paraphrasis of Bourdieus field-theory, where orthodoxy and symbolic capital is called paradigm.

In conclusion, literary reviews play a vital role in stabilising existing paradigms and preventing paradigm shifts by repeatedly communicating the content as mantras for

the field, as a perpetuating prayer for the orthodoxy, like on a Tibetan prayer wheel[1].

But they could also help to get into shifting paradigms. By synthesising and validating

research, emphasising exemplars, and contributing to the accumulation of symbolic

capital, literary reviews reinforce the prevailing theoretical framework. This stabilising

effect ensures the continuity and resilience of the dominant paradigm, making it more

challenging for new paradigms to emerge. The interplay between Kuhn's concept of

paradigms and Bourdieu's concept of social fields underscores the importance of

literary reviews in maintaining the status quo within scientific communities.

Deconstructing the flowers from the garden

Social reality is a complicated and complex phenomenon. It takes a scholarly and

abstract language to describe it, as Bourdieu(2010, XV) says *"[...] a view to*

reconstituting the complexity of the social world in a language capable of holding

together the most diverse things while setting them in rigorous perspective[...]"

Every academic work is an artefact shaped by a complex interplay of various factors.

The relationship between the object of interest, the author, and the social and

academic fields is intricately woven into the micro-; meso- and meta- structure of the

text. This interplay creates a unique and unrepeatable piece of scholarship. The

semantic content and certain superficial theoretical elements are only a small part of

the whole creation. Thus, an academic text is not merely a collection of ideas and

data, but a product of the author's situatedness within a broader social and academic

embeddedness. The unique combination of these influences means that each work is

a unique artefact reflecting the specific conditions of its creation. This perspective

emphasises that the full meaning of an academic text extends beyond its explicit

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[1] Another theoretical perspective to triangulate these phenomena would have been Luhmann's systems theory, but there was not enough space in this essay to elaborate on this.

content to include the subtle and often invisible dynamics of the academic field in which it is produced.

Therefore, I postulate that reviewing literature is a vigorous intellectual act. By incorporating foreign academic research into our own scholarly concepts, we ignore the basic meta structure and complexity of a text and its relations to the social world, reducing it to a single term, phenomenon, or idea. It is like cutting individual flowers from a wonderful, fragrant, and beautifully arranged rose garden. You create a stunning bouquet to honour your loved ones without thinking about the devastation you're leaving behind. But someone must. By rearranging different concepts, first deconstructing them, and then reassembling them with other ideas, phenomena, theories or methods, something new can be created or emerge of its own accord.

Whereas the concepts, methods and ideas of the earlier social sciences were more holistic, trying to explain everything and built on the boundary between right and wrong, today's - some say postmodern - science is more fragmented and ambiguous. There is no longer expertise in a whole discipline, academic fields are decoupling like the rest of society. Many concepts now explain single phenomena at the micro or meso level, with no connections to other phenomena. Reviewing, and especially systematic reviewing, is a postmodern academic phenomenon. In the past, as Eco (Eco 1990) describes, one was dependent on the availability of a good library (with an even better librarian) and the possibility of access to lexicons, scholarly monographs, journals and primary sources. Today, the problem isn't access, but it's the overwhelming amount of information available, and the quality of it.

Lyotard (Lyotard 2009, 24–26) argued that the grand, universal narratives or meta-narratives that dominated modernity have lost their relevance in postmodernity. The anything-goes concepts of everyday life have penetrated deeply into scientific

methodology. Because of the changes that have taken place, for better or for worse - and because of the much more fragmented wreckage on which new scientific knowledge is to be built - it is highly advisable to revise, to differentiate, and to look for just the right theoretical puzzle piece to fit into one's research in order to explain the next small step. This is one of the reasons why literary criticism is more important today than it used to be. The changes in scholarly work, the pressure to publish, the enormous availability of digital information, are leading us to a glut. Without the scholarly pillars that mark the boundaries of a discipline, the phasic differences between inside and outside, without an omnipresent canon of literature in a discipline, this common ground must be negotiated over and over again. Literary reviews are a method of scholarly discourse for carrying out this negotiation of the canonisation of knowledge in a scholarly discipline. But they also construct reality on the other side - being part of a concept in a review published in a canonised journal for a discipline is the symbolic capital that any researcher needs to get into those relevant authors who will become part of the orthodoxy. They will become "part of the number", as it is sung in the Gospel, "O when the saint goes marching in".

Conclusion

In conclusion, the practice of conducting literature reviews serves as a fundamental element in the advancement of scholarly research, particularly in the field of qualitative research. This essay has explored the multifaceted nature of literature reviews, highlighting their critical role in introducing young researchers to new methodologies and theoretical frameworks, as well as their importance in stabilising existing paradigms.

Drawing on Kuhn's notion of paradigms and Bourdieu's social field theory, it is shown that literature reviews function as symbolic acts that maintain distinctions within the

academic field. By validating established frameworks and contributing to the accumulation of symbolic capital, literature reviews reinforce the dominant theoretical framework. This stabilising effect ensures the continuity and resilience of the dominant paradigm, making it more difficult for new paradigms to emerge. However, the critical evaluation of existing literature and the highlighting of anomalies within these reviews also create opportunities for paradigm shifts, facilitating scholarly innovation and progress.

The metaphor of 'deconstructing the flowers from the garden' captures the delicate balance between synthesis and originality in literature reviews. While reviews synthesise evidence from different sources into a coherent whole, they must also be mindful of the potential to overlook the complexity and richness of the original works. This dual role underscores the intellectual rigour required in reviewing literature and the significant impact that well-conducted reviews can have on the academic landscape.

Ultimately, the act of reviewing literature is both a stabilising force and a catalyst for change. It requires a systematic approach, critical insight, and a commitment to advancing collective understanding. By engaging deeply with existing knowledge and remaining open to new perspectives, researchers can ensure that their literature reviews contribute meaningfully to the ongoing dialogue within their fields. This ongoing negotiation of knowledge, facilitated by literature reviews, is crucial to the dynamic and evolving nature of scholarly inquiry.

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