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Adapting Practices from Qualitative Research to Tell a Compelling Story: A Practical Framework for Conducting a Literature Review

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Abstract

Despite the literature review being a common task for researchers, the actual process of conducting a quality literature review can easily be taken for granted. In effort to help qualitative researchers, this paper presents a practical framework for conducting a literature review that stems from qualitative research practices. As a literature review is essentially an analysis of rich textual information, qualitative research concepts, and skills can be creatively applied to the process of conducting a literature review. The present paper aims to share the fruits of qualitative analysis with researchers from all disciplines so that they may make sense of this rich information and tell a coherent and compelling story regarding their own analysis. In particular, this paper outlines foundational similarities between qualitative research and literature reviews and then proceeds to provide adaptable guidelines for connecting qualitative research skills to carrying out a rigorous literature review. We hope to incite curiosity and reflection on how qualitative research skills can be valuable beyond just analyzing qualitative data.

Keywords

literature review, best practices, methodology, qualitative research

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Adapting Practices from Qualitative Research to Tell a Compelling Story: A Practical Framework for Conducting a Literature Review

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Despite the literature review being a common task for researchers, the actual process of conducting a quality literature review can easily be taken for granted. In effort to help qualitative researchers, this paper presents a practical framework for conducting a literature review that stems from qualitative research practices. As a literature review is essentially an analysis of rich textual information, qualitative research concepts, and skills can be creatively applied to the process of conducting a literature review. The present paper aims to share the fruits of qualitative analysis with researchers from all disciplines so that they may make sense of this rich information and tell a coherent and compelling story regarding their own analysis. In particular, this paper outlines foundational similarities between qualitative research and literature reviews and then proceeds to provide adaptable guidelines for connecting qualitative research skills to carrying out a rigorous literature review. We hope to incite curiosity and reflection on how qualitative research skills can be valuable beyond just analyzing qualitative data.

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Introduction

Literature reviews feed new research, and research is naturally the foundation of literature reviews. The literature review is a cyclical process both within the boundaries of a single study and across academic understanding of a topic. In other words, the "literature review is the foundation and inspiration for substantial and useful research" (Boote & Baile, 2005, p. 3). Conducting a literature review is an important part of the craft of research, as this is how researchers can familiarize themselves with current understanding and conversation around the topic and thus position themselves to contribute new and interesting knowledge that meaningfully builds on what is already known. Literature reviews are key for providing a foundational context and identifying current gaps in understanding (Knopf, 2006) to continue pushing our collective understanding forward.

Although conducting a literature review is important for qualitative and quantitative researchers, a common criticism that comes from both journal reviewers and university professors is that authors tend to merely summarize rather than rigorously evaluate and synthesize literature to facilitate novel views of current understanding (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). Particularly in the initial phases of one's academic trajectory, it can be easy to assume that a literature review consists of reading previous studies and summarizing what other researchers have done. However, this assumption can be misleading, because a good quality literature review does not simply list all the relevant research, but rather it synthesizes previous relevant information into a coherent narrative (or argument) that informs the present study being conducted (Boote & Beile, 2005; Tranfield et al., 2003). There are many types of

literature reviews, from synthesizing and critiquing literature to build the foundation in the front end of an empirical study to systematically reviewing a comprehensive set of literature to assess the state of current knowledge on the topic. Moreover, qualitative researchers may need to consider the methodological, ontological, and epistemological underpinnings of previous studies. For example, quantitative studies tend to adopt a positivist understanding of existing research to identify gaps and subsequently move "up the mountain" of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Qualitative studies may adopt a more contextualist approach to enrich understanding of the phenomenon and construct a novel conceptual or theoretical framework to examine unexplored aspects. The diversity of literature review approaches reflects the importance of following a literature review methodology that is aligned with one's own research question(s) and objective(s). Although qualitative researchers may struggle with figuring out where to begin with their own literature reviews, we wish to highlight how qualitative researchers may be particularly well positioned to capitalize on the skills they are developing to analyze qualitative data to carry out a rigorous and meaningful literature review.

Qualitative research skills can contribute to each part of the literature review process, from planning to collecting and analyzing articles down to synthesizing current understanding in a meaningful framework. For example, simultaneous involvement in collecting and analyzing information can be equally useful for the literature review. The practice of displaying information in networks and tables can likewise facilitate establishing a novel and interesting research question. Maintaining coherence between the research question and literature review methodology is also crucial. Qualitative data analysis strategies can be applied to making sense of the literature and constructing one's own arguments and contribution to conversation around the topic. Qualitative research skills could thus be creatively recombined to carry out rigorous literature reviews.

The present paper aims to share the fruits of qualitative analysis with researchers from all disciplines so that they may make sense of this rich information and tell a coherent and compelling story regarding their own analysis. Practical suggestions for novice qualitative researchers can be particularly helpful to gain experience and confidence so they can make better-informed methodological and analytic decisions in the future. We thus outline foundational similarities between qualitative research and literature reviews and then proceed to provide adaptable guidelines for connecting qualitative research skills to carrying out a rigorous literature review. We hope that this may provide a helpful springboard from which qualitative researchers may continue to hone their critical thinking and meaningfully contribute to academia and practice.

Fundamentals of QR That Are Applicable to Literature Reviews

Some of the fundamentals of qualitative research can greatly inform the literature review because they bear remarkable parallels to the process of identifying, analyzing, and synthesizing relevant knowledge on a topic (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012). Qualitative researchers may already be aware of these fundamentals for designing and conducting qualitative research, and we wish to highlight how many of these skills and abilities can be powerful for elaborating a quality literature review. Qualitative research is crucial to expanding knowledge in academic communities as it analyzes rich data that can open novel avenues of inquiry, and this understanding is sensitive to the context in which it is based because human behavior is inextricably linked to broader contextual influences (Thorne, 2019). Analyzing rich and contextualized data thus necessitates a "qualitative sensibility" which consists of having a critical and questioning approach to knowledge in addition to reflecting on one's own assumptions and role in the research process (Silverman, 2011). In other words, researchers are also inevitably shaped by their own contexts, but rather than seeking to eliminate this context

to be an "unbiased" researcher, qualitative research embraces this subjectivity for the unique contributions it can provide to understanding of the topic. As qualitative research emphasizes critical reflexivity and adaptation to explore emerging insights, many qualitative methodologists also value simultaneous involvement in data collection and data analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Silverman, 2014). During a literature review, it is also important to be simultaneously involved in reading the literature and writing out one's own ideas and analyses, because these iterations can facilitate a comprehensive understanding of what is currently known about the topic and where further research can provide important and novel contributions.

One of the central features of qualitative research that distinguishes it from quantitative approaches is its focus on analyzing rich data, which is most commonly presented in the form of text. This focus is crucial for exploring more thorough, thoughtful, or unexpected commentaries on a topic. Thus, qualitative data tends to be relatively "narrow" (i.e., gathered from a smaller number of participants) but rich in descriptions and detailed accounts from each participant. Conversely, quantitative research collects relatively "shallow" but broad data, such that not as much complex detail is collected from each participant (i.e., numerical data is primarily collected), but data is gathered from a much larger number of participants. When conducting a literature review, researchers also share the goal of reaching below the surface of the information present in any single article to draw connections across articles and gain a deeper understanding of the topic. Any single article is also rich in detail, and the body of literature that informs a literature review offers opportunities for the researcher to explore a number of theoretical directions to answer their research questions. In other words, rich and detailed information provides space for novel or unexpected insights to emerge, which is often a key contribution of qualitative research to understanding of a topic. The analysis and synthesis of relevant literature shares this benefit of analyzing rich information to understand and interpret knowledge that is contextualized in the given research topic. Rather than collecting numerical data, the researcher collects detailed text (i.e., articles), which they then need to make sense of in the context of their research problem.

Qualitative research also recognizes all data is enmeshed within a broader context, and researchers need to pay attention to how this context shapes the meanings or experiences being studied. When conducting a literature review, the researcher can similarly enrich their understanding of the literature by considering the broader context and trajectory of each article. Each academic community is shaped by its history, and sensitivity to how the scholarly conversation around the given topic has developed can meaningfully inform one's current understanding of the state of the art of knowledge around this topic. For example, researchers can thus understand how and why different methodologies were developed (such as critical feminist research that emerged in response to dominant practices insufficiently addressing women's meanings and experiences in multiple areas). Moreover, by understanding the broader context of understanding regarding one's research problem, the researcher can effectively identify where gaps are still present. Research gaps may be theoretical, methodological, or empirical in nature, and considering the context of knowledge can help researchers discern in what way their own research can make an interesting and important contribution to advance understanding of the topic. Paying attention to the broader context can thus facilitate a literature review that expands knowledge around the topic in a meaningful way.

Another unique feature of qualitative research is that the research can be flexibly adjusted as new information emerges, and this is often key to conducting inductive research that is purposefully more open-ended to permit analysis of unexpected patterns. This flexibility is precisely why simultaneous involvement in data collection and data analysis is often advocated by qualitative methodologists: the researcher can critically reflect on emerging patterns and subsequently collect more data to explore these possible theoretical directions.

The question of when to conduct the literature review may depend on the chosen qualitative methodology, as grounded theory, for example, is typically characterized by first inductively exploring the primary data that is recollected and only engaging with the literature after the data analysis. However, even researchers following grounded theory can obtain a fuller contextual understanding and enrich their understanding of meso and macro perspectives around their phenomenon by considering relevant literature (El Hussein et al., 2017). Although any researcher is generally guided by their overarching research question when conducting the literature review, this is also a rather open-ended process since the literature review comprises (a) understanding the current state of the art, and (b) developing a theoretical or conceptual framework that will inform the researcher's own analysis in a way that can contribute something interesting and important to the conversation around this topic. In other words, as the researcher engages in the literature review, they may identify potential theoretical directions or different kinds of research gaps that they had not initially considered, and it is valuable to approach the literature review with an intention to develop new knowledge (El Hussein et al., 2017).

Throughout the research process, qualitative researchers exercise a "qualitative sensibility" (Silverman, 2011) by paying attention to processes and meanings and adopting a critical and questioning approach to understanding their phenomenon of interest. A key aspect of this qualitative sensibility is reflexivity, such that the researcher is critically reflecting on both the knowledge being produced and their own role in producing that knowledge. This is also an important practice for the "quality control" of the qualitative study. As Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) put it, simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis can be a "healthy corrective for built-in blind spots" (p. 70). Conducting a literature review is likewise an iterative process, as researchers can continue revising their literature review and study as new information emerges and one's knowledge of the topic is developed. For example, even when writing up one's findings or conclusions, it is valuable to revisit the literature to verify how these findings contribute to existing research (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). In other words, during the literature review, the researcher can be simultaneously involved in reading the literature and writing about it. Indeed, it is often through writing that one's ideas and analyses are actually developed, so reading and writing go hand in hand during the literature review.

Applying Qualitative Research Skills to the Literature Review

Qualitative research concepts and skills can be helpfully mapped onto engaging in cyclical analyses of previous literature, critically reflecting on current understanding, and presenting a coherent narrative that guides readers through relevant knowledge and makes a compelling case for the authors' own argumentation and contributions. The present paper describes a literature review framework that builds on qualitative research concepts and skills, which is summarized in Figure 1. The following sections discuss each part of the framework in more detail by first outlining relevant considerations from qualitative research, then highlighting how these can be helpfully applied to the literature review, and finally providing some practical suggestions for qualitative researchers to conduct a rigorous literature review. We hope that this framework can help qualitative researchers conduct their literature review as well as evaluate the articles they retrieved. Qualitative researchers who find themselves struggling with conducting a literature review around a novel and interesting research question may use this framework to establish solid footing from which they can critically reflect and even re-adapt certain aspects as seen fit. Qualitative researchers working in teams may also utilize this framework to help coordinate their efforts across the multiple researchers. When reviewing the quality of articles in the literature review, researchers may consider the extent to

which the key aspects of this framework are present. We do not wish to convey that this framework must be strictly followed, but we want to incite curiosity and reflection on how qualitative research skills can be valuable beyond just analyzing qualitative data.

Figure 1
A practical literature review framework

Notes. A practical literature review framework that adapts qualitative research practices and outlines the main steps for conducting a literature review

Planning and Designing Research by Writing Memos

Planning one's research is important for designing a quality study, because "a good qualitative research design is one in which the method of data analysis is appropriate to the research question, and where the method of data collection generates data that are appropriate to the method of analysis" (Willig, 2001, p. 21). In other words, research questions, data collection methods, and interpretations of results are interrelated in research (Kross & Giust, 2019). This highlights the importance of considering the organization, planning, and revision of qualitative research from the onset. The researcher is about to begin collecting a lot of rich information, and planning is crucial for keeping track of everything and avoiding getting lost among all the information. Specifying the research topic can form an important starting point, and this usually consists of identifying at least one theoretical keyword as the main interest of the study. A theoretical keyword is a scientific term for a phenomenon, and clear conceptual

and operational definitions need to be defined for these theoretical keywords (Daft, 1995) to meaningfully guide the research and provide the basis for the theoretical contribution of the study (e.g., Whetten, 1989, Sutton & Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995; Smith & Hitt, 2005). With this initial sketching of ideas, researchers can write down what it is they want to study and reflect on why this is a topic worth exploring. When it comes to making sense of rich information, qualitative methodologists unanimously value the process of writing (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Miles et al., 2014). This is often presented in terms of writing memos: researcher-directed notes or journals that capture the ideas and analytical insights of the researcher (Charmaz, 2006; Saldaña, 2013). Simultaneous involvement in reading and writing is likewise advocated by many qualitative methodologists because this allows researchers to flexibly explore all relevant ideas and future directions (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Gordon-Finlayson, 2010; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013; Weston et al., 2001). Qualitative research is an iterative process, and the design of the research can be adapted as the researcher deepens their understanding of the topic but clarifying the main research question driving the study is key to maintaining coherence as the study develops.

As the researcher engages with the literature and refines their understanding of the topic, the overarching design of the research needs to maintain coherence between the research question – what the researcher wants to know and explain – and the recollected information – the articles in the literature review need to be able to provide insights regarding the research question. The research question and theoretical keyword(s) of interest thus provide a helpful means for focusing the literature search and identification of relevant literature. Simultaneous involvement in reading and writing also seems very pertinent to the literature review, and the practice of writing in memos throughout the research process can help foster and demonstrate the reflexive and critical thinking skills that are hallmarks of qualitative research (Levitt et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2007).

To facilitate the process of planning a sound literature review, researchers can begin by first choosing two theoretical keywords that they want to investigate. Specifying two theoretical keywords can provide a helpful basis for focusing on the research topic or problem of interest. Conversely, one theoretical keyword can potentially be too broad for a single study to address, while examining more than two theoretical keywords can result in an overly complicated study that becomes challenging to juggle. Memos provide the perfect space for researchers to engage in writing while they are reading the literature. In other words, memos are repositories for thoughts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). For example, researchers could keep a literature review diary, methodological memos, and analytic memos (BLINDED). The literature review diary could provide a space where the researcher can document their process and reflect on their developing ideas. How each person keeps their literature review diary is up to them, whether they prefer to write with pen and paper or on the computer, but what is important is that the research process is being clearly documented. Thus, during this initial phase, researchers can write in their literature review diary to reflect on their theoretical keywords, note down their ideas, and plan out the next steps. The literature review diary can also be immensely helpful for keeping a "to-do" list and planning how much time will be dedicated to each part. In other words, the literature review diary will be used throughout the entire literature review process, and it provides a perfect space to plan and design the literature review. Finally, as researchers write in their memos throughout each part of the literature review, the goal is to get the researchers' thoughts down on paper and encourage thinking, not perfectly polished writing.

Table 1

Summary of Main Points
● Choose two theoretical keywords
● Document all ideas and reflections in a literature review diary (memos)
● Write while reading, read while writing

Building a Research Question and Conceptual Framework

A natural first step in any qualitative study is the elaboration of a research question as this is crucial to qualitative research (Agee, 2009; Flick, 2009) and forms the base of the study's methodology and design (Kross & Giust, 2019). A research question that is clear, concise, and complex can help establish a study that is both interesting and feasible (de Souza et al., 2016; White, 2009, 2013). Based on this research question, existing research can be analyzed to map out what is already known about the topic and where further contributions can be added to the ongoing conversation. In developing the research question, researchers can specify the two main theoretical keywords they are analyzing and consider whether they want to develop a new theory or test an existing theory (Smith & Hitt, 2005). Inductive research refers to establishing a relationship between observations and theory, including generalizing from a set of observations to a broad statement, such as a theory or general proposition concerning a topic (Given, 2008). Indeed, many qualitative studies include some form of inductive analysis (Yin, 2011). Deductive research, on the other hand, implies starting from an existing theory or theoretical model and subsequently testing this theory. It is important for researchers to think about which approach is best suited for their research question (e.g., whether they want to examine an existing theory or generate new theory around a novel concept or phenomenon). A helpful practice for developing the analytic focus of the study is to sketch out the main concepts of interest and how they relate to one another in explaining the main problem or phenomenon of interest. The practice of elaborating conceptual maps, or graphically representing information, is advocated by many qualitative methodologists for aiding comprehension of rich information because it permits the researcher to view all the relevant information at a glance and consider overarching patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Dey, 1993; Flick, 2009; Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Wolcott, 1994). A conceptual framework lays out "the key factors, variables, or constructs, and the presumed relationships among them" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 20), and it provides an interpretative approach to social reality. Finally, in any piece of academic work, it should be clear how the research contributes new and useful knowledge about the topic being studied. When it comes to conducting qualitative research, one of the hallmark strengths is the possibility to generate new understanding and theory based on the rich data that is gathered and analyzed (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). In other words, it is important that researchers justify the contribution of their work and clearly state why readers should be interested (Daft, 1995). Researchers can ask themselves "so what?" about their research to critically reflect on why this study is important now. By considering how their particular research question relates to scholarly literature and broader socio-political contexts (e.g., thinking about who are the stakeholders that may be impacted by this research), the researcher can develop a clear rationale and purpose for what they are studying (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The research question can then guide the subsequent search for literature. Specifying the focus is central to staying on track and identifying relevant information (Pautasso, 2013), as opposed to reading articles at random and running the risk of getting off-topic or missing literature that was important to the main research topic. Moreover, just as the planning and

development of qualitative research is dynamic (de Souza et al., 2016), we encourage researchers to update or re-adapt their research question and conceptual framework as they refine their understanding of the topic. The literature review diary provides a great space for the researcher to think about and develop their research question(s) and goal(s), and this can help the researcher consider whether they want to conduct an analysis that is inductive, deductive, or a combination of both. The practice of reflexively writing and mapping out the qualitative research question and the thought process behind it (such as considering alternative concepts and research questions) can greatly facilitate transparency and researchers' awareness of how their own positions or perspectives may impact their research (Kross & Giust, 2019). One of the primary purposes of the literature review is to understand what is currently known about a given topic and, by doing so, "make a case" for the present research based on gaps or shortcomings in what is currently known (Braun & Clarke, 2013). In particular, the literature review permits researchers to identify gaps in current understanding and avoid reinventing the wheel (Lamb, 1984). Research gaps can come in a variety of forms: theoretical (where theories or explanations about a phenomenon are missing; Whetten, 1989), methodological (where a phenomenon has yet to be explored using a particular methodological approach), or empirical (where a phenomenon has yet to be examined with a certain type or subset of data). Thus, we recommend that, as researchers read through the sources of their literature review, they pay particular attention to any gaps that other authors mention (Staples & Niazi, 2007; Webster & Watson, 2002) and think about how they can make their argument and theoretical framework for their study. For example, authors typically reflect on their own contributions and where more knowledge is still needed in the limitations and/or suggestions for further research sections of the article. By choosing to address a particular research gap and arguing why this is important to expand knowledge in the field, the researcher can effectively provide a strong case for the value of their own work.

To construct their research question, researchers can follow the practice of stating their research question in a single sentence that incorporates important details, which could include the geographical location or relevant coverage, historical context, and/or meaningful comparisons that need to be made to answer the research question (White, 2009). Thus, the next step is to elaborate the research question of the study by including both keywords and stating which aspect or phenomenon is of interest (e.g., "What steps can social media platforms make to protect users' data and privacy?" or "How can charismatic leadership foster prosocial behaviors?"). Researchers should also conceptually and operationally define their theoretical keywords, and even examining each word (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) in the research question can crucially help clarify the interpretation of the research question (White, 2009).With the two main theoretical keywords identified and defined, researchers can elaborate a conceptual map of their initial ideas. The aim is to create a "map of the terrain" that the researcher will explore (Miles et al., 2014): what are the main concepts of interest, what other concepts may be relevant, and how do all these concepts come together to help explain and ultimately answer the research question(s). This initial conceptual map can then provide a basis from which the researcher will stem in searching for relevant literature to "fill out" the conceptual map with more information to provide an answer to their research question. While reading, all identified gaps can be noted in a memo, so that the researcher can later easily reflect on these gaps and decide which one they will address with their own study. Moreover, it is important to reflect on "why" that gap is relevant and "how" it will be addressed. By critically reflecting on current gaps in a memo, the researcher can explain why their approach is worth exploring and how their work contributes novel knowledge on that topic. Then, the researcher can continue building their conceptual map as they identify the state of the art of current knowledge around this topic as well as key research gaps that motivate the researcher's own study.

Table 2

Summary of Main Points
● Choose which relationship between two theoretical keywords will be investigated
● Sketch out a conceptual map of these two keywords and any other concepts that may be related and are worth examining further
● Elaborate a research question that is clear (e.g., describes the specific phenomenon), concise (e.g., examining specific theoretical keywords in a specific context), and complex (e.g., cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no")

Establishing Coherence Between the Research Question and Methodology

It is of central importance that the researcher chooses a methodology that is coherent with their research question (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), because the methodology is effectively the framework within which the research is conducted. In other words, the methodology delineates how the research needs to proceed to produce valid knowledge, and it provides an overarching guide for subsequent data collection and analysis. While there is a great diversity of methodologies in qualitative research, such as narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and so on, these can be more broadly categorized along two dimensions: experiential and critical approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2013). When a research question is focused on examining and validating the meanings, perspectives, and/or experiences of a particular group of participants, the methodology should follow an experiential focus. On the other hand, when the research question is focused on taking an interrogative stance towards the meanings, perspectives, and/or experiences of participants to explore some other phenomenon, the researcher's interpretations take on a central importance and the methodology should follow a critical focus. It is essential that research methodologies are chosen according to the research question, rather than forming research questions after choosing a methodology. Janesick (1994) raised concerns about "methodolatry" whereby a researcher is almost slavishly devoted to a given method, tends to repeatedly use it, and this method precedes the formulation of research questions that are valuable for social science research. It is also valuable to be aware of adopting the "mono-method" tendency to divide research methods into quantitative and qualitative techniques, as no methods of data collection are necessarily connected to either numeric or non-numeric data, and even numeric information can be traced back to its non-numerical origin (Berka, 1983; Prandy, 2002). The research question is thus the guiding force behind choosing a methodology, and some researchers may even consider combining different kinds of methods to meaningfully answer their research question (Creswell, 2007).

When it comes to conducting a literature review, it is also of central importance that the research question informs the methodology and the researcher's approach to answering this research question is transparently described. Discussions around the use of qualitative and quantitative methods for literature reviews have also proliferated. For example, Snyder (2019) presents three broad types of literature review methods: systematic methods (focusing on quantitative analysis and evaluation), semi-systematic (adopting both quantitative and qualitative analysis and evaluation), and integrative methods (focusing on qualitative analysis and evaluation). Specific qualitative literature review methods include meta-ethnography, meta-synthesis, meta-interpretation, constant comparative method, qualitative meta-analysis, and content analysis (Dixon-Woods et al., 2007). For example, qualitative meta-summary is a quantitatively-oriented aggregation of qualitative findings which involves extracting and grouping findings to calculate frequencies and effect sizes that can inform mixed research syntheses (Sandelowski et al., 2007). Qualitative meta-synthesis can provide a bird's eye view

of theoretical and methodological trends and provide readers a more comprehensive understanding of the relevant literature (Thorne, 2017). However, concerns have been raised that meta-synthesis methods that focus on systematic rather than narrative or critically integrative reviews may be counterproductive to the aims of qualitative research, which highlights the importance of reflecting on why we do qualitative research in the first place (Thorne, 2019). These methods have been used to synthesize literature and provide insights for policy and practice by addressing the inherent complexities in field of research (Finlayson & Dixon, 2008), but researchers have noted challenges with synthesizing qualitative studies in a manner that acknowledges the different philosophical assumptions (Zimmer, 2006), phenomena, and analytic frameworks present in qualitative research (Thorne et al., 2004). A key point that emerges across previous studies on literature synthesis methods is the central importance of explicit descriptions and reflexive applications of the chosen methodology (Dixon-Woods et al., 2007) to both help readers learn how they could similarly apply such methods and contribute to developing knowledge in the field by following scientific rigor (Paterson et al., 2009). More broadly, the literature review can be seen as a kind of qualitative research that analyzes secondary sources of information. The notion of theoretical sampling is thus relevant here (Gentles et al., 2015), as articles are screened and selected based on the researcher's appraisal of whether each article can contribute something meaningful to their present research. Establishing relevant inclusion and exclusion criteria to describe how the researcher decided whether an article was relevant to their research question and methodology is also important (Knopf, 2006; Siddaway et al., 2019; Staples & Niazi, 2007). Finally, unexpected information may emerge during the literature review. Just as qualitative research is well-known for its embracement of emergent information, the researcher could benefit from integrating this serendipitous information into their overall comprehension of their topic (Siddaway et al., 2019). The flexibility of qualitative research can be a double-edged sword, however, since this can permit great creativity and novel insights, but this can also make it easier for researchers to lose their focus on scientific rigor. Therefore, we emphasize the importance of making these methodological decisions according to the research question and then being transparent about how the literature review was conducted.

It is exciting to see this diverse array of possibilities to incorporate qualitative methods into literature review methodologies, as this offers qualitative researchers ample opportunity to apply their analytic skills to carrying out a literature review that is coherent with their own research question(s) and objective(s). For example, in some situations, systematic reviews with their strict requirements for searching for articles could be very effective for providing evidence that can inform policy or practice. In other situations, a research question may require more flexibility and a more creative collection of articles when the purpose of the literature review is not to provide a comprehensive review of all articles published but rather to create a new theoretical model. Thus, the methodology always depends on the research question, and by being aware of the different possible types of literature reviews, researchers can make well informed decisions regarding which type is most appropriate. To begin searching for literature, the researcher can refer to their theoretical keywords, research question, and initial sketch of ideas. It is also helpful to search in at least two different databases to gather comprehensive information about the topic. Researchers can search for their theoretical keywords as well as synonymous terms or additional adjectives to expand the search if need be. By searching for sources based on the research question and initial conceptual map, the researcher can make sure they are staying on track and identifying articles that are relevant to their study (Miles et al., 2014). A methodological memo could be dedicated to saving information on all the collected articles: at the very least, to note down the full references of each article, and researchers may additionally note down the search procedure (such as keywords and databases used) and inclusion and exclusion criteria for identifying relevant and important articles to

build their description of how the articles were theoretically sampled. This relatively technical information regarding each article is also important for keeping track of all the collected sources, and it allows researchers to easily access the original sources again at any point in the future if need be. Moreover, transparently describing the methodology the researcher is following in methodological memos can help ensure proper steps are being taken to ensure the review is accurate, precise, and trustworthy (Snyder, 2019). As the researcher reflects on the contributions of each article in their literature review diary, they can also identify where they need to find more information to build a comprehensive background (Knopf, 2006). Subsequently, the researcher can search for more articles that may help fill those gaps. In other words, the literature review does not have to only comprise articles that are directly related to the main keywords of interest. As the literature review develops, often the researcher will also refer to articles that are more loosely related to the main keywords but that still provide relevant insights into the main phenomenon being studied.

Table 3

Summary of Main Points
● Elaborate conceptual and operational definitions of the main keywords of interest in methodological memos
● Use theoretical keywords as search terms for literature
● Note down in methodological memos the search procedure: keywords and databases used, inclusion and exclusion criteria for determining which sources were relevant
● Follow a literature review methodology that is coherent with the research question, describe and justify the methodology (transparency and rigor) in methodological memos

Making Sense of the Literature

Qualitative analysis is often presented with a thematic organization (i.e., similar information is grouped together, and each theme or category is discussed). While there is a plethora of qualitative methodologies, many of them share a similar goal of identifying overarching patterns or trends in the data (Creswell, 2007; Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Dey, 1993; Miles et al., 2014; Seidman, 2006). Patterns can be identified by examining similarities and differences across the data (Knopf, 2006). Whenever the researcher notices something that is consistently present across the data, they can then stop and consider possible explanations for this pattern (Miles et al., 2014). Identifying patterns of similarities and differences is typically done by coding the qualitative data or attaching "tags" to segments of data to condense information and facilitate synthesis. For example, researchers may begin with pre-coding, or highlighting relevant segments of articles (Saldaña, 2013). Then, they can engage in open coding to begin associating codes to describe and condense segments of information (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser, 2005; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Saldaña, 2013). Elaborative coding could then be employed to code articles by searching for information about their own theoretical keywords and relevant concepts (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013). Finally, researchers can categorize these codes into overarching categories or themes to organize the information and draw connections among categories. This series of coding strategies comes from a foundational model of qualitative data analysis that combines commonly utilized coding methods to provide a potential springboard for qualitative researchers to analyze their data (BLINDED). The serendipity that is common to inductive research may be experienced while reading and analyzing the literature, as researchers may begin by searching for their planned concepts but then meet unplanned concepts, theories,

and/or approaches that are relevant to their research question (Fine & Deegan, 1996). Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) provide a series of possible tactics that could facilitate making sense of rich information, such as making comparisons among different sources, clustering information into groups, or building a logical chain of evidence. While it may be difficult to decide when to "stop" searching for more information, the notion of theoretical saturation can be a relevant endpoint here: the point at which no new information is being added to the conceptual framework or understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Gentles et al., 2015).

In analyzing the relevant literature, the key themes, and debates need to be identified, and these can be used to organize the literature review. Identifying current research gaps is but one goal of the literature review; the other, and perhaps most primary, goal is to present the current state of the art regarding that topic to contextualize the research (Kuhn, 1962; Lakatos, 1986; Merton, 1973). This reflects the state of the art – the current answer to the research question – which is important to demonstrate before the researcher collects and analyzes their own data (Whetten, 1989; Daft, 1995). This step hence entails reading and analyzing all the recollected sources of information. Researchers may do this in whatever way they prefer, and there are a great variety of options, from bibliographic reference managers and qualitative data analysis software to simply using Microsoft Office or pen and paper. Coding the literature (i.e., attaching tags to segments of text and writing analytic notes in memos) can greatly facilitate this analysis process, and applying qualitative data analysis tactics can help researchers make sense of all this information. For example, qualitative researchers could utilize constant comparison analysis, domain analysis, taxonomic analysis, componential analysis, and theme analysis for their literature review, and qualitative comparative analysis seems particularly well suited to reviewing literature with a qualitative data analysis approach (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012; Onwuegbuzie & Weinbaum, 2017). As the researcher continues reading new articles, they may reach a point where they are not finding any new information relevant to their research question. This akin to the notion of theoretical saturation, which can provide a meaningful signal for when the researcher may stop collecting new articles.

No matter the tool each researcher may choose, their analysis of the literature can be facilitated by highlighting segments from the literature that contribute to answering the research question(s) and writing all notes and ideas in analytic memos. In this case, the researcher may choose to dedicate one analytic memo to each topic (e.g., theoretical keyword), one analytic memo to each article, or even one analytic memo to each highlighted segment of information. Once again, it is up to each person to decide which approach is most appropriate for their research question(s) and objective(s), but consistency is most important (i.e., that each source of information is analyzed in the same way). Thus, the researcher is now engaging in extensive reading and writing, and to help stay focused on the most relevant information, we recommend that researchers try to answer their research question(s) based only on information from the literature. Finally, when it comes to writing about the analyzed information, it is strongly recommended to "evaluate" the information from previous sources, rather than simply providing a long list of previous studies that exist (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). For each source in the literature review, the researcher needs to critically reflect on how that source may (or may not) contribute to answering the research question(s), filling the chosen research gap, and providing relevant information for the wider area of study (such as its contribution to the wider discipline or school of thought). By developing their analytic ideas in memos, researchers can begin to draw the overarching picture of the literature. A helpful tip for developing this wide-angle view is to aim to describe the "forest" of literature around the topic, rather than aiming to describe each and every individual "tree" in that forest (Galvan & Galvan, 2017). Researchers can develop a strong and persuasive literature review by developing their own argument throughout the literature review, as opposed to simply compiling a library of work

that was previously done on that topic. By writing analytic memos while reading the literature, researchers can describe the main claims, findings, and conclusions of each study, and, at the same time, they can elaborate their own evaluations of each study. Once all the selected sources have been analyzed, the researcher can consider all their analytic ideas by looking at their memos and considering the best way to present the information to convey their main argument and present the overall picture of knowledge on that topic.

Table 4

Summary of Main Points
● Analyze the state of the art by trying to answer the research question based only on information from the literature review
● Identify research gaps by looking at limitations and/or suggestions for further research sections and write reflexive notes about identified gaps in the literature review diary: what kind of gap it is (theoretical, methodological, and/or empirical), why it is relevant, and how it could be addressed
● Evaluate each source by writing in analytic memos: reflect on how that source may (or may not) contribute to answering the research question(s), filling the chosen research gap, and providing relevant information for the wider area of study (such as its contribution to the wider discipline or school of thought)

● Analysis can follow qualitative coding techniques such as:
    a. Pre-coding: Analyze the data by highlighting relevant segments of articles
    b. Initial coding: Associate codes (or tags) to describe and condense segments of information
    c. Elaborative coding: Read and code articles by searching for information about own theoretical keywords and relevant concepts
    d. Categorization: Group codes into overarching categories or themes to organize the information and draw connections among categories

Using Displays and Building a Compelling Argument

As researchers immerse themselves in the analysis of all the rich information, we agree with what Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña succinctly stated, "You know what you display" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 108). A display refers to any visual format that presents information systematically so that the researcher can draw conclusions and take needed action. There are broadly two types of displays: networks of interconnected nodes and tables of rows and columns (Miles et al., 2014). Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) provide excellent practical information on creating numerous displays, such as building exploratory displays (provisional displays to help make sense of the information), descriptive displays (describing what is seen in the information), ordering displays (organizing information by time, processes, and/or cases), and explanatory displays (developing coherent descriptions of why things happen). Finally, striking a balance between presenting illustrative data extracts and analytic narrative is key. Including many direct quotations may imply that, rather than critically analyzing the information, the researcher is leaving it up to the readers to figure out why or how that information is relevant, yet the researcher ought to incorporate or paraphrase enough evidence from previous work to support their own arguments (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Although these different kinds of displays may traditionally be used more for the analysis of primary qualitative data, we believe they can equally facilitate the analysis of the literature review. Moreover, thematic organization of information can also facilitate the

literature review process as researchers are analyzing a variety of sources and identifying how they contribute to overall knowledge on the topic. In qualitative research, a common goal is to "tell the story" of the data and resulting analysis, and the same can be applied to the literature review. The structure of the literature review can follow the researcher's objectives (Webster & Watson, 2002). For example, if the researcher is aiming to compare how previous work approached the given topic, then the researcher may decide to group together sources that used the same methodology and present each group of methodologically-similar sources in discrete paragraphs or subsections. The same can be done according to publication dates, findings, schools of thought, and so on. Displaying the information obtained from the literature review is an immensely helpful process, because creating a network or table entails considering what are the most relevant pieces of information and how they fit together and, most importantly, this forces the researcher to get all these key ideas down onto (approximately) one manageable sheet of paper. Creating displays thus involves engaging in abstraction from the rich information in the literature review to the main points the researcher wishes to communicate as they explain what their answer to their research question is. Thus, the researcher can improve the readability of their literature review by organizing the information according to the dimensions that are of interest to the given study (Knopf, 2006). This practice likewise encourages researchers to structure their literature review to support their developing argument, as opposed to simply providing a list of what has been previously done. Moreover, as the researcher considers the wider implications of their topic, they are effectively also thinking about their target audience – the people for whom that information may be particularly relevant (Brown, 2009; Knopf, 2006). Considering the target audience can help make the story of their literature review even more engaging.

A researcher may initially begin jotting down notes in a table to summarize key points regarding each article (such as the main concepts, theory, method, etc. of each article). Later, the researcher may find it helpful to begin ordering these articles by common themes, and finally, we recommend that researchers revisit their initial conceptual framework and update it based on all the new information they collected from their literature review. The researcher can now elaborate a comprehensive framework that outlines the relevant information regarding their topic: the main concepts and their overarching relationships. Aside from the fact that visuals are helpful for conveying information to readers, this framework can also serve to organize the flow and presentation of ideas (Miles et al., 2014). In other words, the practice of elaborating this framework encourages the researcher to consider the bigger picture of the literature review. They can then more easily decide which pieces of evidence they will include in their final literature review to sufficiently illustrate the different points. The presentation of evidence could powerfully convey ideas, capture readers' interest, and provide convincing support for the researcher's own arguments. While the researcher guides the reader through the relevant contextual information with the aim of explaining their own arguments or conclusions, information should be presented coherently and transparently. Researchers can develop these skills by working to provide unbiased and comprehensive explanations of the terminology and various viewpoints regarding the topic. The literature review can thus invite readers to consider the information and come to their own conclusions. When writing up the full draft of the literature review, the majority of the content can come directly from the memos. The researcher's revision work, then, consists of putting all the memo contents into a coherent literature review by revising and editing the contents into a logical flow of ideas. It is normal to struggle and hit blocks when writing, and that is why we recommend writing anything and everything that comes to one's mind in memos, and – most importantly – to not "dress up" one's memo writing or become burdened with writing things perfectly. Rather, researchers can let their ideas flow and write as they would naturally express themselves. Later, these contents can be polished during the revision process to present the ideas in a logical flow. For example,

it can be helpful to present the research question at the end of the literature review and synthesize and discuss the literature in a manner that the research question appears to naturally emerge from this previous literature (White, 2009). Researchers may thus strive to develop an argument, not a library, while writing their literature reviews. By organizing the literature review with a logical structure that builds to the researcher's own conclusions or contributions, the researcher is telling readers the story of how their ideas were developed. Researchers can thus engage in dialogue with the literature and bring something new to the discussion. Finally, it is also valuable to think about the target audience and the researcher's own voice in communicating their arguments to write more engaging research. As Mitchell and Clark (2018) succinctly stated, "Life's too short for bad writing. Readers don't need it, and writers of qualitative research should not be part of this crime" (p. 3).

Table 5

Summary of Main Points
• Revisit the conceptual framework and update it to integrate newly gathered information
• Create additional networks or tables, if needed, to summarize and explore information in different ways
• Put together the contents from the memos into the final literature review
• Use the conceptual framework and research objectives to structure the literature review (e.g., organize presentation of information by main theoretical keywords and sub-concepts, methodologies, or chronologically, etc.)
• Paraphrase information from previous sources and cite all references correctly
• Revise the literature review for spelling, grammar, and the logical development of ideas and the researcher's own conclusions

Quality Criteria

It is important to evaluate the quality of qualitative research on its own terms, rather than applying quantitative quality criteria such as assessing the validity of measures or generalizability of the results (Golafshani, 2003). Qualitative researchers may also adopt a processual approach to considering the validity of their research activity in a more holistic and integrated manner, rather than assessing validity "post hoc" as is often done in quantitative research (Hayashi et al., 2019). In addition to strategies such as triangulation and member checking, ensuring the transparency, communicability, and coherence of one's research is important for elaborating a high-quality study (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Transparency can be fostered by consistently writing in memos throughout the research process. Communicability comes from clearly defining the theoretical concepts being studied and succinctly describing the research question and rationale for the study. Maintaining coherence throughout the research can be done by critically and reflexively thinking about one's research question and overall study design. Qualitative research that is transparent, communicable, and coherent can then powerfully contribute to convincing others of the quality of the research and findings.

Along these lines, it is also important to transparently describe the literature review methodology: how sources were searched for and selected (Gentles et al., 2015), and how this information was evaluated (Knopf, 2006; Siddaway et al., 2019; Staples & Niazi, 2007). By including this information in the literature review, the researcher permits readers to understand how the literature review was both conducted and how the researcher's own conclusions were reached. Moreover, relevant parts of the "checklist" for good quality thematic analysis

provided by Braun and Clarke (2013) can likewise be applied for the literature review: interpreting and making sense of information (rather than just paraphrasing), maintaining a good balance between illustrative extracts and analytic narrative, showing a clear match between the researcher's analytic claims and the supporting literature, and telling a convincing and well-organized story about the literature.

A large part of facilitating transparency stems from the researcher writing down and describing what they have done and why. First and foremost, researchers can consistently write about their literature review process in memos, as the present framework has emphasized in each stage. For example, while the research diary serves to describe what is being done in each working session in a more global sense, methodological memos provide a perfect space to note down the exact search and analysis procedures that were employed to identify literature. In writing out the literature review, the researcher can thus put these notes together to tell readers how the analysis was carried out. While readers do not have to necessarily agree with the researcher's own arguments, readers should understand how the researcher came to those conclusions. Communicability refers to the research ideas and concepts being clear and easily understood. Therefore, writing operational and conceptual definitions of all the main concepts is key. While writing out the literature review, it is also important to remember that not all readers will be familiar with the phenomenon or area of study, so it is important to clearly explain which concepts are being analyzed as well as any other important features of the study, such as describing main theories or key relationships among the concepts. Displays (i.e., networks and tables) can also greatly facilitate the communicability of the literature review. Finally, coherence emerges when a study was thoughtfully designed so that the research question could be answered; in other words, the methodology (including the recollection and analysis of information) aligns with the research question. This is one of the reasons why planning one's research is crucial, as the researcher first establishes their research question and objectives, and then a literature review (and research) methodology can be chosen that is appropriate for the research objectives. Conversely, when a study puts forth one research question but then collects and discusses articles that are not relevant to that research question, a clear lack of coherence is signaled. In developing this practical guide for qualitative researchers to apply their qualitative research skills to conducting the literature review, we followed the quality criteria for qualitative research described by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) of transparency, communicability, and coherence to precisely help researchers conduct quality literature reviews that will allow them to meet their research objectives.

Table 6

Summary of Main Points
• Refer to research diary and methodological memos to describe the literature review process with transparency
• Clearly define the main theoretical keywords and relevant sub-concepts to facilitate communicability
• Describe the current state of the art regarding the research question to show coherence between the research question and chosen methodology (e.g., for a systematic review or to explain how the literature review guided subsequent data collection and analysis)

Conclusions

The literature review is crucial to all scientific research. It can be a demanding task, but it is central to orienting readers and facilitating new information that builds on wider

knowledge. The literature review framework presented in this paper was developed with the aim of providing practical guidance for qualitative researchers to help make the literature review a little less daunting. Given that qualitative analysis aims to make sense of rich information, qualitative researchers can apply their qualitative analysis skills to conducting a rigorous literature review. Memo-writing can facilitate planning the literature review, documenting the methodology being followed, and elaborating critical analysis of the literature. Building a conceptual framework from two theoretical keywords can help establish a clear, concise, and complex research question which guides the search for relevant literature. Qualitative coding strategies can condense the rich information to make sense of current understanding and identify research gaps and displaying the information in tables and networks fosters more abstract thinking to identify overarching patterns. Following these steps can facilitate transparency, communicability, and cohesiveness for a quality literature review. We wish to encourage qualitative researchers to creatively apply their skills to conducting a quality literature review – to permit readers to stand on the shoulders of giants and look forward towards new knowledge.

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