Why Qualitative Research Needs More and Better Systematic Review

Alexander M. Clark¹

When did you last do a qualitative systematic review? Not a narrative review that had the semblance of a systematic search bolted in the paper after the fact…but a real meal deal question-led, protocol-driven study of a body of qualitative literature with a systematic approach to study selection, quality, and synthesis. While more qualitative systematic reviews are being done than ever, more are still needed. Here we consider the main benefits of doing more qualitative and mixed method systematic reviews.

Position Yourself and Your Work

Published studies form an integral part of the scholarly conversations of defined knowledge communities (Thomson & Kamler, 2012). These conversations center on topics of shared importance or interest and, as such, include people from different disciplines, career stages, perceived status, and epistemological stances. The scholarly conversations occur in journals via published manuscripts but also through social media, at conferences (during sessions, informal conversations, and even in chats at the bar), during student defenses, symposia, and in corridors (Thomson & Kamler, 2012).

Distinctive communities can focus on topical domains, such as communities focused on heart failure self-care, physician-assisted death, or diabetes in indigenous populations or on methodological domains—qualitative rigor, realist evaluation, or constructivist grounded theory. Like all discourse, there is much variety—sometimes disagreement, sometimes agreement. Notable aspects of the conversations include the topics and content that are much discussed and contested. However, what is assumed, avoided, and/or what cannot be said is interesting too (Thomson & Kamler, 2012). As with many conversations, some voices are loud and say lots with little importance while some voices are quiet and say little with lots of meaning.

Those doing qualitative research cannot “opt out” of knowing their relevant scholarly conversations. Undertaking a qualitative systematic review provides a vital means to know and tune into the past conversation in your topic area that allows the researcher to position themselves and their work substantively, ontologically, theoretically, and methodologically in this landscape. Having an understanding and a credible “take” on the conversations and where you stand within them is a vital part of the formation of scholarly identity and research competency (Thomson & Walker, 2010).

Clarify Your Contribution

Knowing where you stand in these conversations is important but nailing down what your work adds is imperative. Publications often purport to offer “new” insights that have actually been published 10 or even 15 years before. For example, in the early 1990s, qualitative accounts of heart disease used to trickle—with only perhaps a dozen published studies of patient experiences of coronary heart disease. Keeping up was a breeze. Now, there are over 100 published qualitative accounts of heart failure alone (Clark et al., 2014). More papers are published each week. This is exciting and is progress. In the midst of this volume, doing or using a published existing systematic review provides a vital reassurance for the authors, readers, supervisors, and/or reviewers regarding the contribution of new studies to past published work. This is imperative for research, such as for doctorates and funded studies, which are predicated on the need to argue for originality.

Keeping up with scholarly conversations used to be so easy. With no Internet, publications occurred in a few contained “professional” places and contributions were small in number and regulated by physical barriers to production. Yet, where once scholarly conversations trickled, now they flow ceaselessly and endlessly in vast volume. With the advent of social media, electronic publication and access to journal content, and an ever-increasing number of journals, the volume of academic

¹ Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

Corresponding Author:
Alexander M. Clark, Faculty of Nursing, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2R3.
Email: alex.clark@ualberta.ca; Twitter: @DrAlexMClark
content and discussion has proliferated. Keeping abreast of literature, even in relatively narrow areas, has become a mammoth task. Yet, authors still need to demonstrate a mastery of past and current literature to show what their contribution adds to an important scholarly conversation that is new, vibrant, and otherwise useful (Thomson, 2015). Involving others—notably, health librarians—can help ensure reviews are comprehensive. Doing systematic reviews provides reassurance that the research gaps identified in publications and study proposals meet actual gaps—rather than those that reflect poor knowledge of scholarly conversations or weak literature searching skills.

Get Specific

Much qualitative research is still too generic. General studies of the “life experience” of key populations may have been useful and relevant 15 or 20 year ago. However, when studies examining such experiences occur and are published in large volumes without any further attempts to discover nuances of either what is being experienced or the people involved, the research risks lacking focus and may miss vital areas where new knowledge is needed. For example, a series of qualitative systematic reviews (Clark, King-Shier, Duncan, et al., 2013; Clark, King-Shier, Spaling, et al., 2013; Clark et al., 2012) examined almost 100 qualitative studies over 30 years into patient decisions about participating in cardiac rehabilitation programs. For three decades, it has also been known from quantitative research that being female was associated with lower attendance. Yet, examining the 90+ qualitative studies into referral, attendance, and completion of these health services, only three studies actually examined the influence of sex or gender on participants’ accounts and only one of these studies had an adequate theorization of gender (Angus et al., 2015). How, despite decades of research showing sex-based inequalities in access to cardiac rehabilitation, did we end up doing so much undifferentiated qualitative work that ignored sex and gender?

The age in which credible qualitative work could be overtly general (e.g., generic life experience studies) has passed. To more fully extend knowledge, qualitative studies need to be less generic by focusing on particular populations, phenomena, or factors of importance. Documenting fully the volume of past work in an area using systematic review can provide important indications of where work is most needed.

Foster Creativity

Building on the benefits of getting more specific, doing systematic reviews can also be an important impetus for creativity. An understanding of the existing literature in your field not only allows the work’s added contribution to be assessed but also allows that contribution to be better realized. While doing systematic reviews, creative sparks fly. Paradoxically, the imperative of future qualitative studies building on past work becomes even more important as more qualitative research is published. Fully incorporating intersectionality, let alone gender, age, and social status, into new qualitative studies is now imperative (Angus et al., 2015). Findings from reviews can be used to spark our creative thinking by acting as stimulus material to create more complex, nuanced studies that are truly innovative and responsive to genuine gaps in the literature.

Strategic Sense

Undertaking qualitative systematic reviews also provides a range of useful strategic benefits. Proposals seek to make arguments of the benefits of the research, but also establish a credibility narrative for the researcher—that “I know my stuff,” the lay of the research land. This is vital to increase the quality and persuasiveness of both doctoral work and grant proposals.

Further, systematic reviews themselves constitute a useful and important contribution to scholarly conversations. Doing systematic reviews helps the credibility of the researcher by providing additional publication(s) and further establishing the author(s) credibility among the particular scholarly community.

Doing systematic reviews of qualitative work also helps offset the risks with conducting primary studies involving participants. These studies take a long time and have a large number of uncontrollable facets, including challenges obtaining ethics approval, recruitment, and the length of time required for data generation, analysis, and publication. Conversely, qualitative systematic reviews do not require ethics approval, do not involve the inevitable uncontrollable human factors, and are usually more manageable in terms of the volume of data generated. Review work can be done on your own schedule—vital for those holding administrative or practice roles—yet can be highly collaborative and team oriented. Doing reviews also develops vital general research skills such as maintaining adequate study documentation for large volumes of information, following processes systematically and fairly, reading/extracting, and qualitative analysis. For students and those new to qualitative research, it is useful to develop these skills prior to working with real participants.

In summary, with more qualitative research being conducted and published, the need for systematic reviews increases. How can you start doing more qualitative systematic reviews or develop your skills further? Consider attending a workshop from an established researcher, link to and work with a mentor who has led past reviews, and use the vast array of resources, library supports, and methods papers on different kinds of reviews. Doing so is important, strategic, and widely beneficial.

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