

Literature Reviews: Generative and Transformative Textual Conversations

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Abstract: The intention of this article is to invite readers to explore and understand how literature reviews can be conducted from a systemic and dialogical approach. After reading a paper by MONTUORI (2005), I considered how literature reviews could be situated systemically whereby connections and relatedness between people and ideas are identified. This opened up possibilities for me that were transformative, re-positioning a process that I had previously seen as positivist, to one which is connected to a systemic position (BARGE, 2006). In this article, I discuss how I conduct literature reviews from a systemic position; each text speaking to the others as in conversation, identifying themes, connections and generating new knowledge. The concept of texts "speaking" to each other lends itself to a dialogical approach. I will discuss how the systemic, dialogical and ethical considerations should be made.

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1. Introduction

I was moved to write this article after reading a paper by Alfonso MONTUORI (2005), where he discusses his perspective on literature reviews. I aim to present literature reviews framed within a systemic position as understood by Kevin BARGE (2006) when quoting CAMPBELL (2000) in relation to "the connectedness of people, things and ideas: everything connects to everything else" (BARGE, 2006, p.30). I hope to outline how the literature can generate knowledge which may be transformative—transformative by "the continual newness in our lives such as knowledge, expertise, meaning, identity" (ANDERSON, 2007, p.10). Harlene ANDERSON states that transformation is inherent in dialogue; because I am inviting readers to see the papers selected for literature reviews to be in dialogue with each other, the concept lends itself to a dialogical approach, referring to a form of conversation. Consequently, I adopt a

position of addressing how literature reviews can be seen as both systemic and dialogical. Approaching literature reviews from this perspective creates for me energy, excitement and anticipation of what might emerge. This new viewpoint is crucial to me as a senior lecturer in social work because my role involves supervising students conducting literature reviews as a major project. I want to inspire the students and be inspired myself while undertaking literature reviews for my own research. In his paper, MONTUORI (2005) shares his experience of students approaching literature reviews from the "perspective of reproductive enquiry tend to see the authors and views being viewed as 'out there', as disembodied works and positions" (p.375). [1]

This experience is similar to my own when supervising students. In addition to this, the unease from seeing literature reviews as essentially a positivist method, created a desire for me to find a way of introducing energy into the process. By positioning literature reviews through a systemic lens, I feel able to tell the students, "[y]ours is not a role of summariser of everyone else's thoughts and discoveries, but [one of engagement] in *dialogue* with what has been written about your topic" (WISKER, 2001, p.127). [2]

AVEYARD (2014, p.2) defines literature reviews as "the comprehensive study and interpretation of literature that relates to a particular topic." Broadly, there are three objectives for conducting a literature review; firstly, as a research method in its' own right. A researcher develops a research question and a number of related texts are sourced, interpreted, and made sense of in order to respond to the question. Secondly, the literature review may be conducted as a prerequisite to a research project; the researcher may want to gain an overview of the literature that exists and build on an element of this with their own research question. AVEYARD further states the process of attempting to source texts may serve to identify a gap in the literature where no research exists that relates to a research question; in such cases the researcher may conduct research to fill this gap in the literature. Thirdly, there are systematic literature reviews which VERGNES, MARCHAL-SIXOU, NABET, MARET and HAMEL (2010, p.771) define the as "the scientific way of synthesising a plethora of information, by exhaustively searching out and objectively analysing the studies dealing with a given issue." MONTUORI (2005) re-frames literature reviews as "a creative process that can take us increasingly deeply into the relationship between knowledge, self and world" and sees "the literature review as a construction and a creation that emerges out of the dialogue between the reviewer and the field" (p.375). In contrast with MONTUORI who adopts a social constructionist frame, I consider how literature reviews can be viewed from a systemic approach as explained by BARGE when quoting CAMPBELL (2000):

"Systemic thinking is a way of making sense of the relatedness of everything around us. In its broadest application, it is a way of thinking that gives practitioners the tools to observe the connectedness of people, things and ideas: everything connects to everything else" (BARGE, 2006, p.30). [3]

I had previously seen literature reviews as a positivist method of research; the process of systematically recording each step of the literature review to establish reliability when other researchers repeat the same search under identical conditions (ENERSTVEDT, 1989). In the positivist paradigm, there is a single, identified truth "to be found" in the world, that is repeatable and can be measured (DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2011, p.2). Yet, this systematic process has the benefit of transparency and making clear how the research papers are sourced, which in itself is ethical and is not specifically positivist. Still, AVEYARD suggests if the literature review is being conducted prior to a piece of research, then "you must systematically search, critique and combine the literature relating to the topic of enquiry in order to demonstrate a gap in the existing research base and *justify* your proposed research question" (2010, p.1). She emphasizes the word "justify" highlighting the importance of validating or providing a rationale for undertaking the research. This justification falls within a positivist paradigm; the literature review is given a position of privilege as it provides permission (or not) for the researcher to proceed with their inquiry, depending on what exists in the current literature. I use AVEYARD (2014) as my main reference in the positivist approach to literature reviews as her books are recommended to the students I supervise. However, it is important for students, educators, and scholars to be offered a range of approaches in conceptualizing literature reviews that may be better positioned within the paradigm of their choice. [4]

In the following section, I will briefly discuss how this range of approaches to literature reviews can provide consistency to the researcher's position. I will then go on to explore in more depth how a literature review can be both systemic, as in the relational sense of connectivity and dialogical as in the conversational sense. [5]

2. Literature Reviews: Systemic and Dialogical

MONTUORI (2005) provides an insightful alternative to literature reviews when he invites the reader to consider them as "a creative process, one in which the knower is an active participant constructing an interpretation of the community and discourse, rather than a mere bystander who attempts to reproduce [...] the relevant authors and works" (p.375). This sentence strikes me because MONTUORI is considering literature reviews from a social constructionist perspective where meaning and understanding are constructed between people, (BURR, 1995; GERGEN, 1999; McNAMEE & GERGEN, 1992). An educator or researcher from a social constructionist paradigm will likely embrace the approach MONTUORI presents as oppose to working with a traditional positivist approach which contests their own. Being a proponent of systemic thinking, it is important for me to introduce my students to a position on literature reviews which comfortably sat with my systemic thinking and provided them with an alternate view. When I conduct a literature review for the purpose of building on the existing literature, I aim to develop my research *in relation to* these earlier articles, a notion that fits with STRONG, SUTHERLAND, COUTURE, GODARD and HOPE's (2008, p.183) idea of people and things being "understood in a relational context, as products and processes of patterns of relational interaction." It is in this relational context that I conduct the literature review. As part of the

process, I source texts that are connected by the research question. I read and write the review making connections, exploring the patterns and relational interaction between the texts. I enable them to "speak" to each other in discussion and respectful debate. My role is literally as a conductor: to set the tempo, coordinate and harmonize the text while the reader becomes the person listening to a Jazz improvisation. MONTUORI (1996) presents jazz improvisation as a metaphor for education in relation to creativity, learning, collaboration and improvisation. The metaphor is relevant to literature reviews in how creative I am in seeing connections and how the texts work collaboratively in speaking to each other to generate new learning. The improvisation is within the spontaneity of not knowing how one text might connect to another. SHOTTER (2012, p.3) poses the question:

"What, then, is it like to think systemically, rather than to think about systems, to think in a kind of inner dialogue with a felt sense, the presence of a yet unknown something being there in ones surroundings which has not yet been given adequate linguistic expression?" [6]

I lead the exploration of the "yet unknown" connections between the different parts of the literature and then provide a linguistic expression to it by developing a dialogue between the texts. MONTUORI proposes the literature review is a "description of, and entry point into, our community, the beginning of a dialogue with our people" (2005, p.376). It is the text and ideas within them which provide the connectedness and community of which I become a part of; a community of researchers with texts deriving from research questions of a similar inquiry. While in this community I can create dialogical moments where the texts become the voices of the researchers and participants that begin to talk to each other, making (living) connections. SHOTTER (2008, p.1) suggests:

"There is a certain kind of moment in human affairs, when a second person spontaneously responds to the utterances (or other expressions) of a first, that a 'living connection' between them both can be created, a moment that, following Bakhtin (1986), we might call a dialogical moment." [7]

PEARCE (1998) notes, "[w]hen thinking systemically [...] the thinker is self reflexively a part of the system and takes the perspective of a participant or component of the system" (cited in SHOTTER, 2012, p.3). PEARCE is essentially proposing a relational connectedness within a system or community; the same community where I propose it is possible through the text to create dialogical moments. The relational connectedness takes place between the words, themes, topic of inquiry, researcher, and research participants. I seek to find other papers that can respond and connect on any of these levels. The connectedness between the researcher and participants might be demonstrated in how the research was collaborated between them, how the researchers practice experience relates to the participants lived experience and the way in which their lived experience is honored, respected and embedded in the texts with direct quotes or narratives. Later in the article, I suggest there are a number of opportunities in the research process where the cultural, socio-political and lived experiences of the researcher and participants should be considered and written

into the text to make these connections visible. Returning to the dialogical, I explore how the texts speak to me, *before* I can consider how one paper will speak to the other. For example, is the volume of the participants' voice raised loud enough for me to hear their story through their own words or has the paper been written predominantly through words interpreted by the researcher? SIMON (2011, p.137) suggests, "writing can be considered a systemic practice in that it is always relational whether in response to inner dialogue or as part of outer dialogue." I need to become a *dialogical reader* in order to maximize what I gain from the reviewed papers and how I make connections between them. As a dialogical reader, SIMON states, "I want them [writers] to invite me into a conversation with them or spark some reflexive movement in my inner dialogue" (2013, §1). From this perspective, the literature review not only provides the opportunity for me to know who I might be researching and writing in relation to, but enables me to participate in an outer textual dialogue with the authors of the text. Each text contains a written dialogue and by identifying those with a connection, I can facilitate a dialogue *between* the text looking at the ideas, themes, and knowledge that emerge. McNAMEE and SHOTTER suggest, "these relationally-responsive forms of understanding all entail our seeing connections and relations within a living whole, a whole constructed or created from many different fragmentary parts" (2004, p.14). I would stop short of suggesting that by seeing the themes and connections between the related texts that a "whole" is created. The word whole suggests completeness, whereas the process of research is never complete; there is always new, emergent knowledge (GADAMER, 1979 [1975]). This is very much in the same way that PEARCE suggests "we should treat all stories, your own as well as other, as incomplete, unfinished, biased and inconsistent" (2004, p.50). Instead of completeness, putting the texts together creates a conversation that is listened to, made sense of, with the potential to introduce new concepts, add to current thinking, or present something that the reader might be struck by. BACHELARD (1991) states: "For to be struck or arrested by another's words, is not just to understand them in terms of a single kind of connectedness [...] but to find oneself resonating to a whole multiplicity of other, many new possibilities" (cited in SHOTTER, 1999, p.82). [8]

3. Transformative Potential

This "resonating to a whole multiplicity of other, many new possibilities" which SHOTTER (1999, p.82) refers to, leads me to think of a transformative process; a moment when knowledge or knowing changes from grey, to a technicolor extravaganza of thought or ideas. The understanding by ANDERSON of transformation is more gentle, where the transformation does not necessarily happen in a moment when one is struck by something but rather it is "the continual newness in our lives such as knowledge, expertise, meaning, identity" (2007, p.10). I was transformed from a positivist grey to a systemic technicolor extravaganza after reading the paper by MONTUORI (2005). I experienced a suddenness of seeing the *concept* of literature reviews in a new light. I was also transformed in the ANDERSON (2007) sense; gaining newness in my research inquiry that provided added meaning to me, and my identity. To be able to place the literature review in a systemic/dialogical position meant the entire research

process was on a postmodern continuum which fits with my identity as a systemic practitioner. I had previously felt I was starting on a positivist road and having to make a detour after the literature review, to begin my postmodern journey. ANDERSON understands transformation is inherent in dialogue; the dialogical nature in the way the texts speak to each other in a literature review has the potential to be transformative, just as spoken dialogues are when they generate new knowledge, "generative and transformative conversations where we can create what counts as knowledge together" (McNAMEE, 2007, p.317). PUTNAM (2004) presents three conditions that allow for transformation: curiosity, connection, recognition, and trust coupled as one condition. It is important for me to have genuine, or to use VEDELER's (2011, p13) term "benevolent curiosity" when conducting literature reviews. PUTNAM (2004) asserts that "curiosity focuses on probing, comparing, and uncovering assumptions; it aims to explore and learn" (p.284). My curiosity arises from a desire to find out the connections between the literature, researchers, and participants. However, MONTUORI (2005) writes in his experience "students approach literature reviews with an attitude of reproductive enquiry ... loosely referred to as memorisation and regurgitation" (p.374). PUTNAM cites FLETCHER (1998) explaining connections as a shared web of knowledge by finding links between experiences, thoughts, and feelings. PUTNAM (2004, p.286) notes, "Connecting occurs not just by sharing information, but by learning about the other side's story, their problems and concerns, and their worldviews on the situation." In this article, I have introduced the importance of connecting with the research participants in texts in a similar way that PUTNAM talks about connecting to the other sides' story, problems, and concerns, reiterating how critical it is for their voice to be heard. I suggest without this "hearing," the text is less likely to transform the reader and there is also less opportunity for recognition to arise. PUTNAM proposes recognition happens when "parties see moments to introduce the others perspective" (p.288). These moments may be what Tom ANDERSON (1991) describes as arresting, moving, living, or poetic moments occurring in dialogues which move us toward a new way of participating in the conversation. While conducting literature review, my role is to introduce different texts and engage them in dialogue with each other to "reveal both themselves and their 'worlds' to each other. And it is in such living moments [...] that utterly new possibilities can be created" (SHOTTER, 1999, p.1). PUTNAM (2004, p.289) suggests that trust is coupled with recognition; as these 'moments' develop where each parties perspective is introduced, the sharing of perspectives or stories can build trust and form empathy between the parties—but their voices must be clearly heard for this to happen. [9]

I feel I can "trust" the researchers when they are writing from a position of knowing; having practice related knowledge, while also writing from a position of being open to collaborate with the participant who has the lived experience. This style of researcher produces a specific type of knowledge that can be reflected in their texts, quite different from researchers who do not have this practice experience. [10]

4. Knowledge Production

GIBBONS et al. (1994, p.3) distinguish between two types of knowledge production: Mode 1 and Mode 2. Mode 1 knowledge is produced to "ensure compliance with 'sound scientific practice' while Mode 2 knowledge is transdisciplinary, transient, socially accountable and reflexive" (ibid.). Mode 1 knowledge is produced by a "traditional" method; researchers within a university or other research setting, applying positivist processes and methods. As such, the research paper produced would not resemble the "living dialogue in which one can bring all of one's lived experience, questions, and creativity" that MONTUORI (2005, p.379) suggests. Researchers in Mode 1 knowledge category are writing *about* research subjects, as they do not have the lived or practice experience to write a living dialogue. SHOTTER (1999, 2011) refers to this as "about-ness" writing; a retrospective monological style, as opposed to "with-ness" writing where the researcher can write using a prospective relational style, which is possible from Mode 2 knowledge. SIMON (2013, §2) criticizes *about-ness* writing and notes: "I have witnessed how *about-ness* writing can become concretized into oppressive theory and dominate over a century of psychotherapeutic, psychiatric and legislative practice. I connect this style of writing to relations of power played out in language." [11]

Mode 2 knowledge differs in that the researchers do have experience of the subject they are researching into. The research question may have arisen from the reflexive practice of the researcher; as such, Mode 2 knowledge has an emphasis on reflexivity. NOWOTNY, SCOTT and GIBBONS (2001) argue that this emphasis on reflexivity has become a "dialogic process, an intense (and perhaps endless) 'conversation' between research actors and research subjects—to such an extent that the basic vocabulary of research (who, whom, what, how) is in danger of losing its significance" (p.4). However, texts that have been developed from Mode 2 knowledge, with "conversation between research actors and research subjects" (ibid.) would be precisely the papers that I would want to include in my literature reviews in order for the conversation to be continued. [12]

5. Multiple Knowledges, Realities, and Relational Ethics

It is the lived experience of those that we are making inquiries with which is at the essence of qualitative research, but often the research tells us outcomes without telling us much about the participants. When writing the literature review I have "ethical responsibilities to not only [make] visible participants in the text but also to the emergent relationships between writers and their readers, between readers and the writers whose work they are reading" (SIMON 2013, §40). I have already suggested the importance of texts where the participants' voice can be heard. Texts that enable the reader to hear who the researcher is are equally important. GADAMER (1979 [1975]) suggests history and culture shape who we are. The participants, researchers, and readers will therefore be shaped by their histories and culture. The more transparent these are within the text, the greater potential exists for relationships, and respect to emerge based on connections with the historical or cultural factors. LINCOLN (1995) argues "[r]elational ethics

recognizes and values mutual respect, dignity, and connectedness between researcher and researched" (cit. in ELLIS, 2007, p.4). BURNHAM (2011) introduced the "social GGRRAACCEEESSS" (Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Culture, Class, Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation, and Spirituality), building on the idea of being shaped by personal factors that can empower or oppress. [13]

The power dynamic between the researchers, participants and readers are important to be made visible; has the dominant power holder, the white, heterosexual, male researcher (in Western Society) used his power positively to include the (marginalized) black, female single mother in the research and ensure her voice is heard? Has he used his power to write the text in a way that is respectful to the participant and transparent to the reader? There are a number of opportunities for the researcher to make evident in the written text the cultural, socio-political and lived experiences of his or her own and the participants. The first opportunity is the topic of inquiry. I have discussed how Mode 2 knowledge is generated by researchers who have practice experience; the research question often emerges from the reflexivity of this experience or a socio-political issue within the workplace. The researchers' connection to the inquiry question should be clear in the text, as too should the contribution made by the service user, student, or client to the emergent question. Second is the methodology of research. BRYDON-MILLER, KRAL, MAGUIRE, NOFFKE and SABHLOK discuss participatory action research (PAR) and suggest there is an "openness and willingness to allow for multiple knowledges within the PAR process" (2011, p.390). Researchers may choose methods where the cultural, socio-political, and lived experiences of the participants are acknowledged through their participation and collaboration in the research. Thirdly, the selection of participants; a particular lived experience may be required for the participant to be included in the research, however the lived experience of the researcher may influence which participants are chosen. SALWAY et al. (2011) suggest much social research in the UK does not engage meaningfully with participants or communities from ethnic or diverse backgrounds. If the lived experience of the researcher excludes minority groups, they may not consider the need to involve such groups. However, the under representation or exclusion of diverse participants or groups means they will also be excluded from the potential benefits of the research. The fourth opportunity where the cultural, socio-political and lived experiences of the researcher and participants should be considered is within the text presenting the research. [14]

Throughout this article, I have emphasized the need for researchers to ensure they present themselves with transparency in the text and ensure the voice of the participants is heard. Fifth, the evaluation following the research: TINEKE and WIDDERSHOVEN argue that in interactive and dialogical evaluations "the evaluator and the participants learn from each other and are jointly responsible for the outcome of this learning process" (2011, p.672). In order to achieve this, I suggest the evaluator must be as transparent as the participants about their knowledge, experience, cultural and socio-political influences. The same is true for the literature review; as the reviewer I state my interest in the topic of inquiry

and any other cultural or socio-political factors that influence my choice of papers, how I relate to the researcher and participants, what text I introduce, and the connections I make as the texts speak to each other. [15]

6. The Ethics of Writing in the First Person

My preference is to write in first person, and reading texts that have been written in the first person. Not only does this allow voices to be heard, it opens up a number of possibilities, which writing in the third person purposefully seeks to shut down: subjectivity verses objectivity, dialogical verses monological, and transparency verses concealment. AVEYARD (2014) provides a nod from the positivist position as she seemingly *gives permission* for the use of writing in the first person in literature reviews, acknowledging the challenge faced by the reader to distinguish the voice of one researcher from the other. Writing in the first person in a literature review may be a significant transgression from a positivist approach, and for my students who are otherwise encouraged by the institution to write in the third person, upholding the tradition of neutrality. However, KIRSCH (1994, p.382) argues power and politics are behind discouraging the use of the first person

"Omitting the authorial I is a rhetorical strategy that can be (and has been) used to turn opinion into truth, to silence women and other marginalized groups, and to trivialize their concerns ... (T)he uses of an authorial I (or lack thereof) have social, moral, and political consequences for which authors bear responsibility." [16]

The responsibility that KIRSCH suggests authors have in using "I" is a responsibility that I feel researchers have when writing papers; a social, moral, and political responsibility to give a voice to those involved in the research. However, writing in the third person has been given a privileged position; researchers may experience difficulties in having papers accepted for publication when they have been written in the first person (WEBB, 1992). This may be a dilemma for researchers who hope to be published, but morally or ethically no voice should be silenced—their own or the participants—in order to achieve publication. [17]

7. Privileged Papers

AVEYARD (2014) notes a comprehensive literature review which includes literature that supports your idea as well as those that do not, should be sufficient to provide a balanced view. I suggest this approach is not only comprehensive, but also ethical. There is transparency in including text in the conversation that has opposing positions. It is my responsibility as literature reviewer to present the reader with critical opinions from a range of texts creating a sense of a debate, discussion, and dispute in relation to the research question. In doing this I aim to increase the number of voices with different positions, preventing the reader from being misled into believing there is a single, agreed view between the researchers. Although I intend to explore a range of papers, I can only review a

manageable number, therefore I must have an inclusion, and exclusion criteria to explain and determine which texts have been included. [18]

This criteria is needed to make clear how I as a reviewer can "Strive to offer a transparent account to others as to which stories we privilege and which we discard" (SIMON, 2011, p.93). AVEYARD (2014, p.79) further argues: "The important point is that you are able to justify why you have set the inclusion and exclusion criteria, which should be determined by the needs of your review rather than your own convenience." AVEYARD gives the example of an exclusion criterion suggesting papers that are not written in English, written prior to a specific date and papers that are unpublished. I would add two caveats here; firstly, texts need to be understood in the historical context in which they are written. A period in time involving a political, cultural, ideological, or methodological shift leads the text to be developed in a way that captures the essence of the context, providing a unique contribution to the textual conversation. I would consider any significant periods relating to the inquiry question before setting an exclusion criterion involving a time frame to ensure texts with historical importance are included. The second caveat is my suggestion of a risk of publication privilege where published papers are privileged over unpublished papers that are marginalized from a wider scholarly/research community and more difficult to access. AVEYARD does caution against publication bias suggesting published papers tend to show the positive effect of an intervention rather than the negative effect. However, I would argue that there may be a wealth of unpublished papers that are well researched, have been written in the first person, and have remained unpublished due to the positivist bias of writing in the third person. FINE and TURNER (2014, p.300) suggest, "The more marginalized the person is, the less likely his or her knowledge carries social currency and the more likely his or her ideas will be unsolicited by other with more social privilege." The same is true for research articles; papers that are published by a known, established scholar or papers published in a well-known journal are more likely to be privileged in a literature review over other papers. McCARTHY (2001, p.255) notes: "It would appear that some discourses are socially privileged and subjugating, while others are marginalized, silenced, and subjugated." [19]

MONTUORI (2005) reminds us that there are "cultural" factors involved in the area of our specific inquiry. There will be certain journals, publications, conferences, and places where knowledge relating to our interest is constructed and held. These culturally connecting areas can legitimately be privileged due to their relationship to the research area of interest. [20]

8. Summary

Reading a paper by MONTUORI (2005), inspired me to write this article exploring how literature reviews can be situated in systemic and dialogical positions. I found the re-location of literature reviews to be transformative; previously seeing them as part of a positivist research process, to then locate them in a postmodern paradigm. The paper by MONTUORI can serve as a reminder of the need to challenge the taken for granted, uncontested aspects of our practice that no longer "fit" within the paradigm we situate ourselves in. As an educator, I need to keep my practice engaging, meaningful, current and with a coherent theoretical underpinning. Like the conductor of an orchestra, if any of these instruments of my practice become out of synchronization, it is my responsibility to introduce something with the right tempo to reinstate a sense of harmony. When students are not engaged, educators have are ethically accountable to question what has always been and to introduce new and exciting ways of thinking, doing and being. If my students or someone reads this article and is transformed from grey to a technicolor extravaganza of thought or they consider different ways of approaching texts, my writing fulfilled its objective. [21]

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