

Sage Research Methods: Data and Research Literacy

How to Use a Literature Review to Inform Research Design: A Case Study of Thriving in Residential Care

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Learning Outcomes

After reading this How-to Guide, students should be able to

- recognize the value of mapping the literature field to shape research design;
- recognize different types of literature reviews and evaluate which is the most appropriate for their research;
- understand the basic steps of conducting a scoping literature review; and
- identify ways in which literature can influence methodologic choices, understand how ethical and professional standards are met, and identify gaps in the existing literature field.

How-to Guide

In most research projects, conducting a literature review is a critically preliminary step. Ollhoff ([2011](#), p. 15) described a literature as “a scholarly document that reviews the breadth and depth of literature on a topic in order to determine what is known.” A well-designed literature review is a way of synthesizing, critically evaluating, analyzing, and describing an existing body of knowledge. The purpose of a literature review is to establish familiarity with a research area and identify where there are gaps in knowledge, and it can be a way of summarizing and disseminat-

ing a large body of literature so that time-pressured policymakers, practitioners, and other researchers can make sense of a large amount of data quickly.

The process of searching, reading, and mapping the research that has already been conducted on a particular topic can familiarize researchers with the existing research field by showing what has already been covered in this area and to what extent. A well-conducted literature review reveals gaps in the current contribution to the research area under investigation and highlights where more research is needed, which can shape the unique contribution that your research can make. In some published papers, authors even may explicitly suggest that more research needs to be done in this area, which gives a clue as to what areas need more attention. Furthermore, when you propose your own research or write up your final results, readers will need to be reassured and persuaded that your research is relevant and worth doing. They will want to know what research question you are addressing and why. They also will want to know who else has conducted similar research and how it might be different from your research. And they might ask how your research is relevant and makes a contribution to existing research?

This guide takes you through some of the main types of literature review so that you can evaluate which is most appropriate for your research. Then the guide takes you through an example of a recent social science (specifically in the area of health and social care) research project that I, as part of a My Home Life England team, have worked on, entitled, *Thriving in residential care*. The project was one of the largest qualitative studies of its kind, exploring older people's experiences of living in a residential care home. I will guide you through the process of conducting a scoping literature review for this project and describe in detail how this

shaped the decisions in this project and how it informed the research design.

Please note that there is considerable debate about how and when to review literature in grounded-theory research ([Deering & Williams, 2020](#)). This guide does not go into detail about this, but it might be helpful to understand that a grounded-theory approach involves a systematic process of discovering and verifying knowledge through a methodologic and iterative process of data collection and analysis ([Corbin & Strauss, 2014](#)). Glaserian grounded theory typically has viewed the early-stage literature review (before data collection) as constraining on research design, resulting in unwanted preconceptions and influence on the study.

Conducting a Scoping Literature Review

There are many different ways in which a literature review can be conducted, including systematic reviews, meta-analyses, rapid reviews, and scoping reviews. The type of literature review that you undertake depends on your academic discipline, the purpose for which you would need the review, the audience for which you are writing, and the time resources you have to complete it. For instance, a *systematic review* is an exhaustive examination of the literature that aims to seek out, appraise, and synthesize the evidence in the literature. The aim of this type of review is to find out what is known and where there are gaps in knowledge. A systematic review requires explicit methodologic detail and usually requires at least two people to review the methods and findings, which reduces the level of bias in the review. In a systematic review, you also would conduct a quality assessment of the included studies. A *meta-analysis* combines the results of different studies to create a comprehensive understanding of the findings and their effects and to

draw new conclusions. A *rapid review* uses a simplified systematic review method to assess what is already known; rapid reviews can be used to understand an evidence base quickly, but they do not undergo the same level of rigorous assessment for quality as a systematic review. Finally, a *scoping review* is employed when you want to identify the scope of the existing research and identify gaps in knowledge. As with a systematic review, scoping reviews also involve systematic searching, analyzing, and synthesizing of the existing research, but the key difference is that a scoping review does not usually involve a quality assessment of the studies.

This section outlines the steps in how we conducted a scoping literature review in the research project *Thriving in residential care*. The next section demonstrates how this review influenced the project's research design.

When embarking on this large qualitative study on the experiences of older people living in residential care, the first step was to explore the literature to identify what research currently exists, where the identifiable gaps are, and what have been key findings. My team and I wanted to conduct a scoping literature review to examine the literature on the experiences of living in residential care and what matters to older people, highlighting emerging themes. [Arksey and O'Malley \(2005\)](#) stated that scoping reviews are useful for rapidly mapping key concepts in a research area, and Lee, Woo, and Mackenzie ([2002](#), p. 20) wrote that in a scoping review, "the intention is not to be exhaustive, but rather to offer a detailed review so as to draw out gaps in existing knowledge and identify areas of future research."

To guide the scoping literature review, we followed the six-step framework of [Ark-](#)

[sey and O'Malley \(2005\)](#):

Step 1: Identify the question. In this step, you formulate a clear, concise research question that will guide the review. This creates clarity about the review's aim, ensuring an effective search strategy, and creates breadth of coverage in the identified papers. For my residential care project, the guiding research question was, "What are the experiences of older people living in residential care?"

Step 2: Identify relevant studies. Identifying the relevant studies for a review involves a systematic search of library databases so that you can find the key studies most appropriate for your study. To start, it is important to consider what your inclusion and exclusion criteria are for your searches. Inclusion criteria can entail the keywords as well as language, methods, and/or date of publication. Characteristics not of interest or relevance to your study are your exclusion criteria.

In this step, for the residential care project, my team and I worked with a librarian to identify which databases should be searched for relevant studies. We searched the following databases: CINAHL, Medline, PsycINFO, SPORTDiscus, Scopus, and Google Scholar. We systematically searched a range of carefully selected keywords alongside Boolean operators (AND, OR, and NOT), which allow you to try searching for different combinations of words. We included the following words in systematic combination:

- Care home/nursing/residential care/residential care facility/long-term care/permanent or established care/care facility
- Residents/older people/elderly/seniors/aged/old people/old person/geriatric

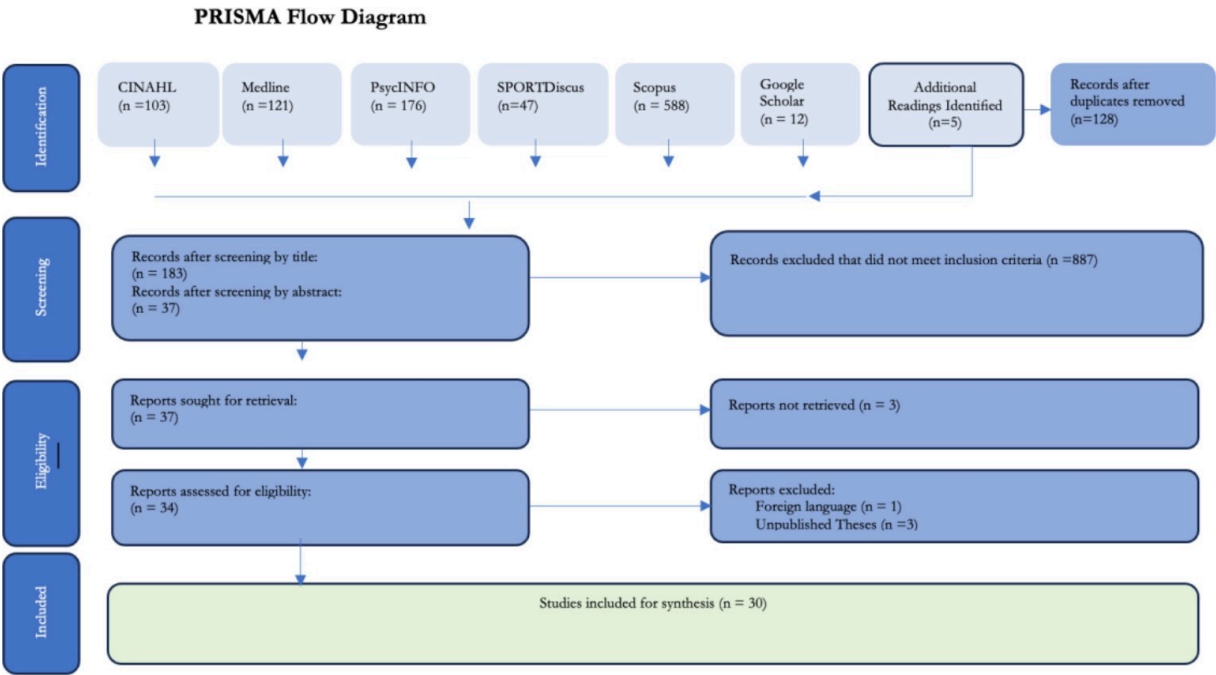
- Relatives/informal carers/families/adult children/adult child
- Staff/care teams/formal carers
- Experiences
- Benefits/positives/satisfaction
- Challenges
- Impact
- Outcomes
- Well-being
- Quality of life
- Social connection
- Safety and security
- Activities

In the search, some words were truncated, which means that we used an asterisk (*) at the end of a shortened variation of a word so that we might retrieve the variations on that word. For example, we might search “secur*” to find both the keywords “secure” and “security.”

Other inclusion criteria were the terms related to our required population. We searched for the keyword “care homes,” specifically referring to nursing and residential homes. We excluded accommodation described as “community villages,” “supported living,” “respite,” “hospice,” “sheltered,” and “sheltered housing.” We also focused initially on people who had lived in a care home for a year. We wished to exclude studies focused *solely* on transitions to care (i.e., studies where the care home placement was temporary or for respite) and focus on established placements. Thirty articles were eventually selected for the final stage of review.

We searched all library databases for peer-reviewed articles published over a 20-year span between 2003 and 2023 to ensure that we had a comprehensive and up-to-date understanding of the literature on this topic. It is important to set a clear timeframe for your review because it contextualizes the findings within a particular time period and gives your review a manageable scope so that the relevance of the findings can be assessed.

Stage 3: Study selection. In this third step, we applied inclusion and exclusion criteria to filter the results as well as exclude duplicates. We developed a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flow diagram to visualize the screening process and evidence the selection process of articles and decision-making processes included in the review. A PRISMA flow diagram “depicts the flow of information through the different phases of a systematic review” (<https://www.prisma-statement.org/prisma-2020-flow-diagram>). This transparency of process increases the reliability and rigor of the study’s findings.



From: Page MJ, McKenzie JE, Bossuyt PM, Boutron I, Hoffmann TC, Mulrow CD, et al. The PRISMA 2020 statement: an updated guideline for reporting systematic reviews. *BMJ* 2021;[372:n71](#). doi: [10.1136/bmj.n71](#). For more information, visit: <http://www.prisma-statement.org/>

We wanted a global reach, so part of our inclusion criteria was to search for articles published worldwide but in English because of our inability to translate non-English resources due to resource constraints. Most of the papers were European in origin, with a high number from the Nordic countries (n = 8). We excluded foreign-language articles due to the resources involved in translation. We searched across a range of methodologic designs and included studies using qualitative, quantitative, mixed methodologies, case studies, and systematic literature reviews. We searched across peer-reviewed and gray literature sources and other literature reviews. However, these actions resulted in the addition of three unpublished PhD theses, which we decided to exclude due to the resources required to fully review them and the fact that they were not peer-reviewed publications. We also found that the quality of the peer-reviewed papers added an increased level of rigor and validity to the research. Peer-reviewed articles are usually considered the most reliable and high-quality form of publication because they

will have undergone a rigorous review and evaluation by academic experts in that field. Constructive feedback during the peer-review process can ensure that authors produce a publication of the highest standard and address any gaps or inaccuracies. This quality-control process helps readers trust the validity of the publication.

Step 4: Charting the data. This step involves reading the identified papers and extracting the relevant information from them (for example, participant characteristic, intervention, methodology, outcomes, recommendations) then displaying this in a tabular format, which allows for an easy comparison across the studies.

In this stage we read through each paper twice to become familiarized with it, and while reading, we manually highlighted any key themes emerging in the text. These were identified inductively, which entails a bottom-up approach from which codes emerge from a close reading and understanding of the data. In this stage, we wanted to gather information on the purpose and scope of the study, the sampling strategy and the resulting research population, the type of data that was collected, the analytic approach used, the way in which ethics were considered, the strengths and weaknesses of the study, the literature that the study had drawn on, and the significant findings of the study. Each reviewed article was summarized in an extraction table using the following headings:

- Paper number
- Title
- Year of publication
- Author

- Country
- Aims
- Study participants and sample
- Study design
- Methods
- Limitations
- Results
- Article summary

Step 5. Reporting results. Following creation of the extraction table, the next step is to report the results by highlighting the key themes and patterns across the included studies. This might be accompanied by tables illustrating this.

In this stage, we coded the papers in a thematic chart and then through inductive coding using the computer-assisted qualitative software package MAXQDA. The thematic chart listed the publication at the top of each column, and the themes were represented in rows. The themes were determined through an initial inductive coding of the study, which means that, for example, when we identified the theme of “activities” in a care home, we would list that as a theme in one of the rows. Once we were satisfied that we had identified all the key themes and added them to the rows, we reread the papers and identified whether that theme was present in the paper. We made a mark in the column against the corresponding row if that theme was present. [Table 1](#) shows just a very small section of the thematic table we created. “Feelings of home” refers to the top-level theme, and the next column shows some of the subthemes. Across the top you can see the reviewed

publication; each marked cell is where we found that this theme was discussed. You can see that paper 4 by [Baxter et al. \(2021\)](#) mentions people’s belongings when they move into care and how this relates to “feelings of home,” but the sub-theme of freedom from chores is not mentioned.

Table 1.						
	(2) Anderberg & Berglund (2010)	(3) Atwal et al. (2003)	(4) Baxter et al. (2021)	(5) Björk et al. (2017)	(6) Boelsma et al. (2014)	(7) Bollig et al. (2016)
Feelings of “home”	x				x	x
Belongings/ objects	x		x			
Freedom from chores						

Once we had completed these initial stages of coding and charting the themes, we then collated them into four overarching general themes, which provided the overview of the literature. The emergent themes in this project centered around (a) transitions to care, (b) thriving in care, (c) meaningful engagement, (d) social connections, and (e) feeling at home in a residential care home.

Step 6: Consultation. This is an optional step in the literature review process according to [Arksey and O’Malley \(2005\)](#). In this step there is the option to consult with stakeholders, have the review validated by other academics in the field, and disseminate it through publication to determine its validity, to

identify whether any further study is to be required, and to enhance methodologic rigor. We worked through this step by presenting the findings to the project's research advisory group (which included experts by experience) and through publication of the results. These stakeholders were able to ensure that the search criteria were robust and that all the relevant studies were included and validated emerging themes.



Section Summary

- There are many forms of literature review, and the type of literature review that you undertake will depend on your academic discipline, the purpose for which you would need the review, the audience for which you are writing, and the time resources you have to complete it.
- Scoping literature reviews are useful for highlighting emerging themes, mapping out the range and nature of the existing literature, and identifying overarching key concepts emerging from the literature.
- This study followed a six-step framework for conducting a scoping literature review as set out by [Arksey and O'Malley \(2005\)](#). The six steps are (a) identify the question, (b) identify relevant studies, (c) study selection, (d) charting the data, (e) reporting the results, and (f) consultation.
- Stages of the literature review process were presented in a PRISMA diagram, an extraction table, and a thematic chart.

Literature Review Informing Research Design

Carefully selecting the most appropriate readings and then extracting and summarizing the key points from each paper were important steps in being able to map the existing research in this area. The resulting extraction table enabled us to *identify what is already known about the topic and any gaps*.

In our study, one clearly identifiable gap centered around the sample sizes of the reviewed studies. Qualitative studies generally have a small sample size, primarily to focus on in-depth understanding and the complexity of participants' stories rather than to make wider generalizations. In this literature review, the "Study participants and sample" column of the extraction table showed that the average number of participants was 21. However, in our study, we wanted to capture not only the depth of experience but also a unique level of breadth of understanding of this population of older people living in care and those who care for them. As a result, we conducted 125 interviews with older people, family members, and care teams across 16 care homes in England, Scotland, and Wales. This has now become one of the largest in-depth qualitative studies on the experiences of care homes in the United Kingdom. We are in the stages of archiving these data and developing ongoing data collection on the experiences of care home life so that it creates a lasting legacy and resource that can be used by other researchers.

The second identifiable gap was that existing research tended to focus on a very small number of care homes and did not reflect different inspection ratings, sizes, or types of residential care homes or a particularly wide geographic spread of homes. This gap informed our research design in that we decided to employ a

purposive maximum-variation sampling strategy to create a heterogeneous sample capturing a wide range of perspectives and insights on life in residential care homes, resulting in a sample of care homes representative of a variety of different characteristics. All homes selected for participation provided residential care for older people, and in addition, some care homes included nursing care, mental health care, and end-of-life care. We selected homes representing a wide geographic spread across the United Kingdom, including two Scottish homes, two Welsh homes, and 12 homes in England. We also tried to recruit care homes in Northern Ireland, but unfortunately, we recognized early in the process that Northern Ireland's ethical protocols are different from those of the rest of the United Kingdom and required a much more stringent and extensive ethical application not possible to achieve within the timeframe of this project.

Across England, Scotland, and Wales, we identified homes in different locations, including rural, urban, and coastal locations. We looked at the type and size of provider, including small family-run homes, charity-run homes, large providers (>10 homes in the group), and small to medium-sized providers (<10 homes in the group). We also included differently funded homes: for-profit, not-for-profit, and charity-run homes. The final consideration for the care home sample was around the Care Quality Commission rating or equivalent inspectorate ratings in Scotland and Wales. We sampled across Care Quality Commission ratings or equivalent inspectorate ratings in Scotland and Wales from "Requires improvement" to "Excellent."

We noticed that across the reviewed studies in the literature review, there was little to no discussion of ethnicity or diversity in the studies, and ethnic minorities were

not included in the sampling of the studies. Only three papers mentioned ethnicity, and this was only in the context of a limitation. In the *Thriving in residential care* project, diversity was an important consideration in our sampling, and we included faith-based homes (one Jewish and two Christian homes) and two Asian care homes.

None of the reviewed papers mentioned sampling across sexuality. As a result of this lack of diversity in sampling in care home research, we created an equality and diversity monitoring form that each participant completed before their interview, which enabled us to see the spread of ethnic and sexual diversity in the sample population. Although no older people in our study identified as LGBTQIA+, we were able to hear these voices of sexual and gender diversity through the stories of care team members. Hearing these voices, even indirectly, was a significant strength and unique aspect of this project and formed the section of the final report called “Thrive inclusively.”

Literature reviews can *inform the methodologic choices in a research design, how ethical challenges are addressed, and how professional standards (equality and integrity in the research process) are met*. Literature reviews can indicate the strengths and weaknesses of employing a particular methodologic approach. The literature review for *Thriving in residential care* highlighted that qualitative studies often used observational methods in conjunction with interviews, so although the average number of interviews was 21, many of the studies triangulated these data with several hours of observation. The *Thriving in residential care* project was funded for only 1 year (with just 3 months available for fieldwork), and given the geographic reach of the sampling of care homes, there were not enough time and

resources to be able to ethically justify an observation methodology. Observation requires a more immersive approach in the environment, and we could only visit each care home for two consecutive days, so it did not feel fair or reasonable to capture these simple snapshots in time.

Two reviewed studies used focus groups as their research method, and two studies used a quantitative survey in addition to their qualitative methods. Having conducted focus groups in care homes previously, I recognized that these are not always hugely successful because care team members are often very busy people, and it is hard to gather multiple staff together at once without leaving the care setting short staffed. Furthermore, conducting focus groups within a workplace setting can be tricky because care teams do not want to celebrate their success for fear of how they will be viewed in a group, and they also do not want to criticize their workplace in front of colleagues for fear of repercussions. Finally, there is also the risk of coercion and care teams feeling that they must take part. We did not feel that this approach would work well for our study.

We chose to conduct in-depth interviews in each care home, which was a commonly used approach in most of the reviewed studies. In the other studies with qualitative interviews, we found that there was more of a focus on the voices of the older people but less so on the voices of relatives or care team members. Only one study included all three voices in a sequential mixed-methods approach with 15 older people, 12 relatives, and two care team members. This study involved a quantitative questionnaire followed by an interview with each participant. We found only one study that included all three groups: residents, relatives, and the care team. We identified from our literature search that there needed to be more

research on the triad of voices in care (i.e., care teams, residents, and relatives), and this was the approach that we adopted in the final research design.

One of the challenges we faced in this project was including the voices of those living with dementia. Due to the limitations of the ethical process and approval, it was important that we only interviewed people who were cognitively well enough to provide informed consent to the interview process. We recognized that this meant that some residents were unable to take part in the research, but having those experiences represented would have been valuable. We were frequently asked by those working in health and social care why these voices were not being included. The literature review helped reassure us that this was a common concern in this research field and that specific and more complex routes for ethical approval are required, which are beyond the scope of a 1-year research project. The review also gave us evidence and justification for not including those voices in this phase of the research because almost none of the existing studies we reviewed included the voices of those living with advanced dementia.. We also were able to learn from reading the other studies how other researchers had managed such challenges and ways around them. We navigated this dilemma by interviewing a couple of residents with communication and milder cognition limitations alongside a trusted companion. We heard the stories of people with more advanced conditions through the voices of the care teams and family members, who were able to shine a light on the experiences of the more vulnerable people that they cared for. Through these stories, we were better able to understand some of the experiences of those with more advanced dementia and other healthcare needs.

Many of the reviewed studies focused on the negative aspects of care home life

or had a singular focus such as on loneliness or mealtimes. We were interested in a broader level of experience. What was it like to actually live in a care home? One particularly useful paper was another published systematic literature review. Across the studies that we looked at there were some identifiable benefits to moving into a care home, but only “A recipe for thriving in nursing homes,” by [Baxter et al. \(2021\)](#) attempted to synthesize the literature in this area. Their review considered the conditions or ingredients necessary for living well in a care home. They recognized that moving from independent living to a communal care environment has its challenges but that people who move into a care home also can fulfill their potential, lead purposeful lives, and thrive and flourish given the right conditions. The authors concluded by calling for further research into “the various facets of these personal, social, spatial and societal contributors from different ontological and epistemological paradigms, and cultural contexts, to work towards a more comprehensive understanding of thriving which can be operationalized for use in assessing and promoting thriving in nursing homes” ([Baxter et al., 2021](#), p. X).

This concluding statement in the paper by Baxter et al., published just 2 years before our project, clearly acknowledged a significant gap in understanding “thriving” in a care home environment, particularly from a more ethnically diverse population. The authors called for a deeper exploration of the range of dimensions in which older people can thrive in a care home, and this became the basis for what we sought to capture in our study, which identified six key dimensions in which older people can thrive in residential care.



Section Summary

- This section highlighted how the literature review informed the research design of our study.
- We found that existing research lacked diversity in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, and across care home types, and this informed our sampling strategy.
- The literature review informed the study's methodologic approach.
- This study built on the existing literature in this area and explored what conditions enabled older people to thrive in care homes.

Conclusion

This How-to Guide has outlined some of the main forms of literature review and detailed a scoping literature review design. The guide has demonstrated how a scoping literature review was a critical step in the research process for a project exploring the experiences of older people living in residential care. I have taken you through the steps of conducting a scoping literature review and illustrated, with a case example, how the literature review shaped the methodologic design of the project.

The guide has argued that a literature review is central to understanding the existing literature and to identifying emerging themes and interpreting ideas, detecting gaps or shortcomings in existing studies, and recognizing opportunities to create a unique contribution to the field of study. A literature review integrates and

synthesizes the main ideas and debates around a topic, helps avoid duplication of research, shapes the theoretical framework, and offers important insights into the methodologic approaches. A well-considered and well-implemented literature review enables researchers to clearly illustrate what they perceive the present knowledge to be and the questions they need to ask to extend that knowledge.



Multiple Choice Quiz Questions

1. Literature reviews can inform research design by

- ☐ a. telling you exactly what you have to do in your own research.
- ☐ b. identifying what is already known about the field and where the gaps might be.
- ☐ c. enabling you to avoid applying for ethical approval for your research.

2. Systematic scoping literature reviews involve

- ☐ a. a simple internet search of what literature is out there.

☐ **b.** systematically mapping the key concepts in a research area.

☐ **c.** showcasing your research ideas.

3. Well-designed research

☐ **a.** should try to replicate existing published studies.

☐ **b.** should only be based on the researcher's preassumptions.

☐ **c.** can be methodologically and theoretically informed by existing studies in the field.

SUBMIT

CLEAR

START OVER

Further Reading

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