Literature Review as an Analytical Process in Peace and Conflict Research

By

Treasure Osita-Iyieke
Department of Peacebuilding and Development
Faculty of Peace and Conflict Studies
&
Kingdom E. Orji
Department of History and Diplomatic Studies
Ignatuis Ajuru University of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt,
Rivers State, Nigeria
Tel: +2348034623541 Email: kingdom.orji@iaue.edu.ng

Abstract

Literature review is widely recognised as an essential component of academic research, yet it is frequently treated as a preliminary or descriptive stage rather than as an analytical process that actively shapes knowledge production. This paper reconceptualises literature review as a continuous analytical activity that extends throughout the research process. Drawing on established methodological literature and its application within Peace and Conflict Research, the study adopts a qualitative conceptual approach based on critical analysis and synthesis of scholarly sources. The paper argues that literature review performs multiple analytical functions, including identifying conceptual and methodological gaps, constructing knowledge, mapping scholarly debates, informing methodological decisions, and guiding the interpretation of research findings. It further demonstrates that these functions are particularly important in Peace and Conflict Research, where complex and contested phenomena require sustained engagement with diverse theoretical perspectives. By reframing literature review as an integral process of knowledge construction rather than a procedural requirement, the paper contributes to methodological debates and offers a stronger conceptual foundation for conducting rigorous and critically engaged research.

Keywords
Literature Review; Knowledge Construction; Analytical Process; Peace and Conflict **Research; Research Methodology; Conceptual Analysis**

Introduction

Every meaningful research endeavour begins not with data collection, but with critical engagement with existing scholarship. It is through the literature review that researchers examine competing perspectives, identify gaps in knowledge, and position their studies within ongoing academic conversations.

Far from serving as a routine preliminary exercise, literature review is the stage at which research problems are refined, theoretical perspectives are selected, methodological choices begin to take shape, and the foundations for interpreting findings are established. Its influence therefore extends beyond summarizing previous studies to shaping the production of knowledge itself. Methodological scholarship has long recognised the importance of literature review in strengthening academic research. Beyond identifying research gaps,

refining research questions, and establishing theoretical foundations (Creswell, 2014; Hart, 2018; Ridley, 2012), contemporary methodological research increasingly emphasises literature review as a rigorous process of critical synthesis and knowledge production rather than a descriptive summary of previous studies (Linnenluecke, Marrone, & Singh, 2020). Nevertheless, literature review continues to be treated in much research practice as a preliminary procedural requirement, limiting its potential to generate conceptual insight, inform methodological reasoning, and advance scholarly understanding.

The implications of this limitation are particularly significant in Peace and Conflict Research. Research in this field seeks to explain complex social realities that are shaped by historical, political, economic, cultural, and relational factors. Such complexity demands sustained critical engagement with multiple and sometimes competing bodies of knowledge. Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, and Miall (2016) argue that conflict cannot be adequately understood through a single explanatory framework, while Lederach (1997) emphasizes the importance of historical and relational contexts in understanding peacebuilding processes. Likewise, Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) demonstrate that peace research must engage with diverse knowledge systems if it is to avoid narrow or incomplete interpretations. These perspectives suggest that literature review performs a far more substantial role than providing background information; it actively shapes how research problems are framed, how evidence is interpreted, and how knowledge is constructed.

Against this background, this paper argues that literature review should be understood as an ongoing analytical process rather than merely a preliminary stage of research. It contends that literature review actively contributes to knowledge construction by interrogating existing scholarship, identifying conceptual and methodological gaps, informing theoretical and methodological choices, and strengthening the interpretation of research findings. Reframing literature review in this way moves it from the margins of the research process to one of its central analytical activities.

By advancing this perspective, the paper contributes to methodological debates in Peace and Conflict Research and offers a conceptual framework for understanding literature review as an integral component of knowledge production rather than a procedural requirement. The discussion begins by examining existing methodological perspectives on literature review before analysing its analytical functions and considering the implications of this reconceptualization for research practice in Peace and Conflict Research.

2.1 Literature Review as an Analytical Process

Literature review has traditionally been presented as an essential component of academic research because it enables researchers to engage systematically with existing scholarship before undertaking original investigation. However, reducing literature review to a preliminary or descriptive stage overlooks its broader intellectual function within the research process. Methodological scholarship increasingly demonstrates that literature review is not merely concerned with summarising previous studies but with critically analysing, synthesising, and interpreting existing knowledge in ways that shape new research (Hart, 2018; Ridley, 2012). Hart (2018) argues that literature review extends beyond information gathering by requiring researchers to examine relationships among ideas, identify

inconsistencies within existing scholarship, and recognise areas where further investigation is needed. Similarly, Ridley (2012) maintains that an effective literature review involves critical engagement rather than descriptive reporting, requiring researchers to compare competing perspectives, evaluate the strengths and limitations of previous studies, and establish a clear scholarly position. In this sense, literature review becomes an analytical exercise through which existing knowledge is interrogated rather than simply documented.

This analytical function is further reflected in broader methodological discussions. Creswell (2014) observes that literature review strengthens research by refining research problems, guiding theoretical choices, and informing methodological decisions. Crotty (1998) likewise argues that research meaning is constructed through engagement with existing theoretical and conceptual frameworks rather than emerging independently from empirical investigation. These perspectives collectively suggest that literature review constitutes an integral stage of knowledge construction because it shapes how researchers understand problems, interpret evidence, and justify the significance of their studies.

Accordingly, literature review is better understood as a continuous analytical process that accompanies research from the formulation of the research problem to the interpretation of findings. Rather than functioning solely as an introductory chapter, it provides the intellectual foundation through which research is positioned within existing scholarly debates and through which new knowledge is developed.

2.2 What Does Literature Review Analyse?

Understanding literature review as an analytical process requires moving beyond the assumption that it merely compiles previous studies. The primary object of analysis in a literature review is not simply published literature but the knowledge contained within that literature. Researchers critically examine existing concepts, theories, methodologies, empirical findings, and scholarly debates in order to understand how knowledge has developed, where disagreements exist, and what questions remain unresolved. The emphasis, therefore, is on analysing ideas rather than describing publications.

This analytical process involves identifying patterns, contradictions, assumptions, and omissions across the existing body of scholarship. Rather than treating each study as an isolated contribution, researchers synthesise evidence from multiple sources to reveal broader intellectual trends and conceptual relationships. Hart (2018) argues that literature review requires researchers to establish connections among ideas and evaluate the strengths and limitations of existing knowledge, while Ridley (2012) similarly emphasises that critical comparison and synthesis are essential features of effective literature review. Through this process, literature review transforms individual studies into a coherent understanding of the current state of knowledge.

In Peace and Conflict Research, this analytical function assumes even greater importance because many of the concepts examined, including peace, conflict, violence, security, reconciliation, and justice, remain contested within the literature. Researchers must therefore evaluate competing theoretical perspectives, examine the assumptions underlying different approaches, and determine how these perspectives influence the interpretation of conflict

situations. Such analysis enables researchers to position their own studies within existing scholarly debates while identifying opportunities to extend or challenge prevailing knowledge. Consequently, literature review should not be understood as a passive summary of previous research but as an active process of intellectual inquiry through which researchers evaluate evidence, construct conceptual understanding, and establish the scholarly foundation for original research. It is through this analytical engagement that literature review contributes directly to knowledge production and strengthens the overall quality and credibility of research.

2.3 Literature Review as Knowledge Construction

Understanding literature review as an analytical process also requires recognising its role in the construction of knowledge. Research does not emerge in isolation; rather, it develops through continuous engagement with existing scholarship. By critically examining previous studies, researchers identify what is already known, question established assumptions, reconcile competing interpretations, and define the intellectual space within which new knowledge can be produced. Literature review therefore functions not merely as a record of previous scholarship but as the process through which new scholarly understanding begins to take shape.

Knowledge construction within literature review occurs through critical analysis, comparison, and synthesis rather than the accumulation of information. Researchers evaluate competing explanations, reconcile divergent findings, and develop coherent interpretations that extend existing scholarship. While Hart (2018) argues that literature review enables researchers to establish relationships among ideas, recent methodological scholarship further characterises literature reviews as interpretive processes that actively generate new conceptual understanding through evidence synthesis and analytical integration (Linnenluecke et al., 2020). Literature review therefore contributes directly to scholarly knowledge by transforming dispersed evidence into coherent analytical insight rather than merely documenting previous research. It is this analytical engagement that enables researchers to produce studies that are theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous, and capable of making meaningful contributions to academic knowledge.

2.4 Literature Review as Conceptual Mapping

Beyond constructing knowledge, literature review performs an important conceptual mapping function within the research process. Rather than presenting isolated summaries of previous studies, it enables researchers to organise existing knowledge into coherent conceptual relationships. Through this process, researchers identify how key concepts are defined, where theoretical perspectives converge or diverge, and how ideas have evolved across different contexts. Literature review therefore provides an intellectual map that guides the direction of subsequent research.

Conceptual mapping requires researchers to move beyond identifying what individual authors have written towards understanding the broader structure of scholarly debates. Hart (2018) argues that literature review should establish relationships among concepts and reveal patterns within existing knowledge rather than merely catalogue previous studies. Similarly, Ridley (2012) emphasises that effective literature review involves synthesising diverse

perspectives into a coherent analytical framework capable of supporting new research. This process allows researchers to recognise conceptual overlaps, theoretical tensions, and areas where further clarification is required.

Within Peace and Conflict Research, conceptual mapping is particularly valuable because central concepts such as peace, violence, conflict transformation, reconciliation, security, and justice are interpreted differently across theoretical traditions. Liberal, critical, feminist, post-colonial, and indigenous approaches often assign different meanings and priorities to these concepts. Literature review enables researchers to examine these competing interpretations systematically and to position their own studies within the most appropriate conceptual tradition. In doing so, it strengthens theoretical coherence and enhances the analytical quality of research.

Viewing literature review as conceptual mapping therefore reinforces its role as an active analytical process rather than a descriptive account of existing scholarship. By revealing relationships among ideas and providing a structured understanding of complex academic debates, literature review enables researchers to develop clearer theoretical positions and produce more coherent and intellectually rigorous research.

2.5 Literature Review and Methodological Decision-Making

Literature review also plays a critical role in informing methodological decisions throughout the research process. Methodology is not developed independently of existing scholarship; rather, it evolves through researchers' critical engagement with previous studies, theoretical perspectives, and established research practices. By analysing how earlier researchers have approached similar problems, literature review enables informed decisions regarding research design, data collection methods, analytical techniques, and the overall direction of inquiry. Methodological literature consistently demonstrates that the selection of research methods should be guided by the nature of the research problem and by existing knowledge within the field. Creswell (2014) argues that reviewing relevant literature enables researchers to identify methodological approaches that are appropriate for addressing particular research questions while recognising the strengths and limitations of previous studies. Similarly, Crotty (1998) maintains that methodological choices are closely connected to the theoretical and epistemological assumptions that emerge through engagement with existing scholarship. Literature review therefore provides the analytical basis upon which methodological decisions are justified rather than arbitrarily selected.

Within Peace and Conflict Research, methodological decision-making is particularly important because conflict-related phenomena are often characterised by complexity, sensitivity, and contextual diversity. Researchers must determine whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approaches are most appropriate for investigating particular forms of conflict, peacebuilding, reconciliation, or violence. They must also evaluate how previous methodological choices have shaped existing knowledge and consider alternative approaches capable of producing deeper or more contextually grounded understanding. Literature review provides the critical analytical foundation necessary for making these methodological judgments. Consequently, literature review should be recognised not merely as a source of background information but as an essential analytical process that strengthens

methodological rigour. By critically evaluating previous research designs, methodological assumptions, and analytical approaches, researchers are better equipped to develop research strategies that are coherent, credible, and capable of generating meaningful contributions to knowledge.

2.6 Literature Review in the Interpretation of Research Findings

The analytical role of literature review extends beyond the formulation of research problems and methodological choices into the interpretation of research findings. Research findings do not acquire meaning solely through the presentation of empirical evidence; they become meaningful when they are interpreted in relation to existing knowledge. Literature review therefore remains an active analytical process throughout the final stages of research by enabling researchers to explain how their findings confirm, challenge, refine, or extend previous scholarship.

Interpretation requires more than comparing results with earlier studies. It involves analysing the significance of findings within broader theoretical and conceptual debates, explaining areas of agreement or divergence, and demonstrating how new evidence contributes to scholarly understanding. Hart (2018) argues that literature review enables researchers to situate their findings within the wider body of knowledge, while Ridley (2012) emphasises that continuous engagement with existing scholarship strengthens critical analysis and supports more robust interpretation. Through this process, literature review transforms empirical observations into meaningful scholarly contributions.

This function is particularly significant in Peace and Conflict Research, where similar empirical findings may be interpreted differently depending on the theoretical perspective adopted. For example, the outcomes of peacebuilding initiatives may be viewed through liberal peace theory, conflict transformation, critical peace studies, or indigenous peace frameworks, each offering distinct explanations of the same phenomenon. Literature review enables researchers to evaluate these competing interpretations critically and to justify the analytical perspective through which their findings are understood. In doing so, it strengthens both the credibility and the intellectual depth of research.

Understanding literature review as part of the interpretation of findings reinforces the argument advanced throughout this paper that literature review is not confined to the opening stages of research. Rather, it remains an ongoing analytical process that accompanies the researcher from the identification of a research problem to the explanation of research findings. Through continuous engagement with existing scholarship, literature review contributes directly to knowledge production and ensures that research findings are interpreted within a coherent and critically informed scholarly context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative conceptual research design because its objective is to examine the methodological role of literature review rather than generate or analyse primary empirical data. Conceptual research is appropriate where the aim is to clarify concepts, interrogate existing assumptions, and develop new theoretical or methodological understandings

through critical engagement with established scholarship. Rather than producing new empirical evidence, conceptual studies advance knowledge by reinterpreting existing ideas and proposing alternative ways of understanding recognised phenomena (Jaakkola, 2020). In this study, literature review itself constitutes the object of analysis, enabling a systematic examination of its analytical functions and its contribution to knowledge construction within Peace and Conflict Research**.**

3.2 Data Sources

The study relies on published academic literature drawn from peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, and recognised methodological texts on research methods, literature review, and Peace and Conflict Research. These sources were selected because they provide established theoretical and methodological discussions relevant to the study. Particular attention was given to works addressing critical analysis, knowledge construction, research methodology, and the role of literature review in scholarly inquiry.

3.3 Method of Analysis

The study employed qualitative document analysis and critical synthesis to examine methodological scholarship on literature review. Rather than describing individual sources in isolation, the analysis compared methodological arguments, identified recurring concepts, examined areas of convergence and divergence, and synthesised these insights into a coherent conceptual interpretation. This approach reflects the analytical purpose of conceptual research, where knowledge is generated through the critical integration and reinterpretation of existing scholarship rather than through the collection of primary empirical data (Jaakkola, 2020; Linnenluecke et al., 2020). Through this analytical process, the paper develops the argument that literature review functions as a continuous process of knowledge construction that informs research design, methodological reasoning, theoretical positioning, and the interpretation of findings.

Section 4 – Discussion

4.1 Literature Review Beyond a Preliminary Stage

The findings of this study challenge the conventional tendency to regard literature review as a preliminary stage undertaken solely to introduce a research topic. While methodological literature consistently acknowledges its importance in identifying research gaps, refining research questions, and establishing theoretical foundations (Creswell, 2014; Hart, 2018; Ridley, 2012), the present analysis demonstrates that these functions are fundamentally analytical rather than merely preparatory. Literature review does not simply precede research; it actively shapes the intellectual processes through which research is conceived, developed, and interpreted.

Viewing literature review exclusively as an introductory exercise underestimates its epistemic role within the research process. Such a perspective confines literature review to the transmission of existing knowledge rather than recognising its capacity to generate new conceptual understanding through critical comparison, synthesis, and interpretation.

Reconceptualising literature review as an analytical process therefore shifts attention from what researchers read to what they do with existing scholarship. The value of literature review

lies not in documenting previous studies but in producing the analytical insights that make original research possible

4.2 Literature Review as Continuous Analytical Engagement

The discussion presented throughout this paper supports the argument that literature review remains active throughout the entire research process. From the formulation of research problems to the interpretation of findings, researchers continually engage with existing scholarship in order to refine concepts, evaluate evidence, and strengthen analytical reasoning. This continuous engagement reflects the dynamic nature of knowledge production, where new findings acquire meaning only when interpreted within broader scholarly conversations. Rather than functioning as a discrete chapter that is completed before data collection begins, literature review accompanies researchers as they make methodological decisions, reconsider theoretical perspectives, and interpret emerging evidence. In this sense, the distinction traditionally drawn between 'literature review' and 'analysis' becomes less rigid than is often assumed.

Analytical engagement with existing scholarship is not ancillary to research but constitutes one of its principal intellectual activities. Literature review and analysis should therefore be understood as complementary rather than sequential processes, each contributing to the construction, refinement, and interpretation of scholarly knowledge.

4.3 Implications for Peace and Conflict Research

The reconceptualisation advanced in this paper carries important implications for Peace and Conflict Research. Because conflict-related issues are characterised by conceptual diversity, historical complexity, and competing theoretical interpretations, researchers require more than descriptive familiarity with existing literature. They must critically evaluate alternative explanations, recognise underlying assumptions, and situate their studies within ongoing scholarly debates.

Understanding literature review as an analytical process strengthens the capacity of researchers to address these challenges. It encourages deeper engagement with theoretical perspectives, promotes more coherent methodological choices, and supports richer interpretations of complex conflict phenomena. As a result, literature review becomes an essential mechanism through which Peace and Conflict Research develops more rigorous, context-sensitive, and intellectually grounded scholarship.

4.4 Implications for Research Practice and Knowledge Production

Reframing literature review as an analytical process also has broader implications for research practice. Researchers should approach literature review not as an administrative requirement to be completed before 'real research' begins, but as an intellectual activity that continues throughout the research cycle. Such an approach encourages critical thinking, continuous reflection, and sustained engagement with evolving scholarly debates.

Ultimately, the value of literature review lies not simply in documenting what is already known but in enabling researchers to explain why knowledge has developed in particular ways and how new knowledge can meaningfully extend existing scholarship. Viewed from

this perspective, literature review becomes one of the principal mechanisms through which rigorous academic inquiry is achieved and knowledge is continuously constructed.

Section 5 – Conclusion

5. Conclusion

This paper has reconceptualised literature review as a continuous analytical process that shapes the production of scholarly knowledge rather than serving merely as a preliminary stage of research. By examining methodological literature and its application within Peace and Conflict Research, the study has demonstrated that literature review performs functions that extend far beyond summarising previous studies. It enables researchers to identify conceptual and methodological gaps, evaluate competing perspectives, inform methodological decisions, interpret research findings, and position new studies within ongoing scholarly debates. For Peace and Conflict Research, where knowledge is shaped by complex, contested, and evolving realities, this analytical understanding of literature review is particularly valuable. Continuous engagement with existing scholarship enables researchers to develop more context-sensitive interpretations, justify methodological choices, and generate meaningful contributions to academic knowledge.

Ultimately, this paper contributes to methodological scholarship by reconceptualising literature review as an analytical process through which knowledge is critically examined, synthesised, and constructed. This perspective challenges conventional views that confine literature review to a preliminary stage of research and instead positions it as an intellectual activity that informs every stage of scholarly inquiry. For Peace and Conflict Research, where complex and contested realities demand sustained critical engagement with diverse bodies of knowledge, recognising the analytical role of literature review provides a stronger methodological foundation for producing theoretically informed, methodologically rigorous, and conceptually meaningful research.

References

Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1966). The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge. Anchor Books.

Booth, W. C., Colomb, G. G., & Williams, J. M. (2016). The craft of research (4th ed.). University of Chicago Press.

Creswell, J. W. (2014). Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Crotty, M. (1998). The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process. SAGE Publications.

Hart, C. (2018). Doing a literature review: Releasing the research imagination (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Jaakkola, E. (2020). Designing conceptual articles: Four approaches. AMS Review, 10(1–2), 18–26. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13162-020-00161-0

Lederach, J. P. (1997). Building peace: Sustainable reconciliation in divided societies. United States Institute of Peace Press.

Linnenluecke, M. K., Marrone, M., & Singh, A. K. (2020). Conducting systematic literature reviews and bibliometric analyses. Australian Journal of Management, 45(2), 175–194. https://doi.org/10.1177/0312896219877678

Mac Ginty, R., & Richmond, O. P. (2013). The local turn in peacebuilding: A critical agenda for peace. Third World Quarterly, 34(5), 763–783.

Ramsbotham, O., Woodhouse, T., & Miall, H. (2016). Contemporary conflict resolution (4th ed.). Polity Press.

Ridley, D. (2012). The literature review: A step-by-step guide for students (2nd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Snyder, H. (2019). Literature review as a research methodology: An overview and guidelines. Journal of Business Research, 104, 333–339. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.07.039