Unpacking assumptions in research synthesis: A critical construct synthesis approach

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Research syntheses in education, like meta-analyses (Glass, 1976) and best-evidence syntheses (Slavin, 1986), are conducted to identify evidence-based practices by combining findings across studies whose constructs are similar enough to warrant comparison. Yet constructs come preloaded with social, historical, political, and cultural assumptions that anticipate how research problems are framed and solutions formulated. The information research syntheses provide is therefore incomplete when the assumptions underlying constructs are not critically understood. We describe and demonstrate a new systematic review method, critical construct synthesis (CCS), to unpack assumptions in research synthesis and to show how other framings of educational problems are made possible when the constructs excluded through methodological elimination decisions are taken into consideration.

**Keywords:** critical theory; educational policy; disability studies; meta-analysis; qualitative research

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**Keywords:** critical theory; educational policy; disability studies; meta-analysis; qualitative research

Although many narrative (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006) and systematic review methods—such as metanarrative (Greenhalgh, Macfarlane, Bate, Kyriakidou, & Peacock, 2005), metastudy (Paterson, Thorne, Canam, & Jillings, 2001), and critical interpretive synthesis (CIS; Dixon-Woods et al., 2006)—can be drawn upon to critique constructs, none fully answers our call, through a systematic process, to understand how constructs and methodological elimination decisions frame the results of research syntheses. In Table 1, we clarify research synthesis as our object of critique. We characterize and differentiate research syntheses, such as meta-analysis and best-evidence synthesis, from other systematic reviews that do not include methodological elimination as an integral part of their study screening process. We also show how neither traditional nor qualitative systematic review methods include a systematic process to critically analyze constructs in existing research syntheses. Interrogating constructs in research synthesis is needed (we argue) in the field of education, where governments and educationalists privilege these syntheses to answer questions about what formulated. Making explicit the social, political, historical, and/or cultural accounts of “disability” can reveal the hermeneutic circle in which a research synthesis is involved and suggest possibilities for including alternative accounts of constructs.

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works in policy and practice (Donmoyer, 2012; National Research Council, 2002). To support dialogue and decision making that is more fully informed, contextualized, and critical, inquiry must also examine the social, historical, political, and/or cultural assumptions underlying constructs.

In this article we describe and demonstrate a new systematic review method, critical construct synthesis (hereafter CCS). A CCS explores and critiques constructs included and excluded from research synthesis, particularly through the process of screening out studies that fail to meet methodological standards for providing best or quality evidence. It shows how reexamining research syntheses in light of constructs identified in methodologically excluded literature may open up possibilities for reframing educational problems.

**Exclusion, Constructs, and Critique in Research Syntheses**

In broad terms, the aim of any research synthesis is to summarize and evaluate research and knowledge on a topic. With the introduction of meta-analysis, research syntheses became tools for

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Literature Review</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Systematic Process for Reviewing Primary Literature</th>
<th>Includes All Primary Literature</th>
<th>Includes Critical Analysis of Constructs</th>
<th>Critiques Existing Research Synthesis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Traditional review</td>
<td>A review that provides an overview of literature on a topic. Does not use systematic review methods.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical review</td>
<td>A review of literature that critically examines primary literature. Does not use systematic review methods.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Systematic review</td>
<td>A review that synthesizes only studies that meet predetermined methodological standards</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research synthesis: Best-evidence synthesis</td>
<td>A systematic review that summarizes studies through statistical comparison of findings</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research synthesis: Meta-analysis</td>
<td>A systematic review that summarizes studies narratively, rather than by meta-analysis</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metanarrative</td>
<td>A systematic review that seeks to show various ways researchers have understood a heterogeneous topic area, often over time.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metastudy</td>
<td>A systematic review that aims to generate new insights into phenomena through an analysis of theory, methods, and finding of qualitative research.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical interpretive synthesis</td>
<td>A systematic review that aims to develop an interpretive model of a phenomenon from existing literature.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical construct synthesis</td>
<td>A systematic review that aims to critique the constructs in literature included and excluded from an existing research synthesis.</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** Literature reviews relevant to the object of critique and methods in this article. For different and more exhaustive typologies of literature views, see, for example, Petticrew and Roberts (2009); Gough, Thomas, and Oliver (2012); and Kastner, Antonya, Soohiha, Strausa, and Triccoa (2016).

*Some meta-analyses and narrative reviews do not exclude quantitative studies based on the quality of their designs (Cooper & Hedges, 2009). They do, however, exclude qualitative and conceptual literature.

*Metastudy does not exclude qualitative studies based on the quality of their designs (Paterson, Thorne, Canam, & Jillings, 2001). They do, however, exclude quantitative and conceptual literature.

*Critical interpretive synthesis includes quantitative and qualitative studies but excludes those deemed “fatally flawed” (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006).
quantifying an intervention's effect by pooling estimates across studies (Glass, 1976). As a quality control measure, reviews often restrict research syntheses to studies passing exacting standards of methodological rigor. The U.S. Department of Education’s What Works Clearinghouse (WWC; 2014), for example, reviews only well-designed quasi-experimental studies, single-case designs, and randomized experiments. Yet, excluding studies not up to methodological par conflicts with the idea of reviewing the full knowledge base. Glass (2000), for one, has remained “staunchly committed to the idea that meta-analyses must deal with all studies, good bad and indifferent” (para. 33). Restricting research syntheses to studies that meet methodological standards may be an effective tool for establishing evidence-based practices, but choosing only well-designed studies does not inoculate research syntheses from the influence of constructs and the assumptions they carry.

Under previous positivist notions of social science inquiry, constructs, thought of as latent variables, were operationally defined in order to sanitize them of tacit assumptions (Phillips & Burbules, 2000). Such treatment rested on a hard distinction between theoretical constructs, which were loaded with assumptions, and empirical constructs, which were taken to be assumption free. But the distinction between these two types of constructs failed to hold after Kuhn (1962) showed that scientific communities work within prevailing frameworks (paradigms), which are central to empirical claims. Despite advantages that may accrue from operationally defining constructs in the process of a research synthesis, doing so does not isolate constructs from their social, political, historical, and cultural contexts. The identification of underlying assumptions in the research synthesis process is not a warrant for “anything-goes” relativism or a call to increase objectivity. Rather it supports the position that methodological decisions about what research designs to include in a research synthesis, and constructs that inform and emanate from those decisions, ought to be unpacked and subject to critique.

The recognition and use of critique in reviews is not new. Cooper (1985) noted early on that the purpose of conducting a review could be critical to show how previous conclusions were unwarranted based on “the literature’s incommensurability with the reviewers’ theoretical stance and/or criteria for methodological validity” (p. 10). Similarly, Petticrew and Roberts (2006) described critical reviews as aiming to critique methods and results of primary literature but without “using the formalized approach of a systematic review” (p. 41).

A host of qualitative systematic review methods now employ more formalized approaches to critique primary literature in the review process. For example, the metasynthesis phase of metasynthesis explores how various theoretically informed analytic options influence research findings (Paterson et al., 2001). Dixon-Woods and colleagues (2006) also characterize CIS as not just summarizing the literature’s data but also tracing the sociopolitical origins of entrenched constructs. However, CCS stands out from these systematic review methods because it takes research synthesis as its object of critique and shows how research synthesis results are sensitive to constructs in the literature it includes.

Introducing CCS

Before demonstrating our use of CCS, we describe it in terms of its philosophy of inquiry, methodology, and methods.
Step 1: Identify a Research Synthesis of Interest

The primary aim of CCS is to critically explore constructs in an existing research synthesis. Therefore, in the first step, the research team selects a research synthesis of interest. Reasons for selecting a particular synthesis will vary, but it is important that the search strategy used in the original research synthesis be published or otherwise known so that it can be replicated.

We chose to consider a research synthesis based on the first author's participation in a U.S. Department of Education–contracted systematic review of literature on postsecondary outcomes for youth with disabilities (Cobb et al., 2013) that used WWC guidelines (with some modifications) to screen primary literature. The aim of the research synthesis was to identify effective programs and strategies that support students with disabilities in the United States to transition from high school. Reflecting on the synthesis and its processes, the first author worried that of the 738 studies passing the abstract screening process, only 16 met WWC standards (with reservations). She wondered about assumptions the constructs “disability,” “employment,” “independent living,” and “postsecondary education” advanced in the final report and what understandings might have been enabled in a more inclusive review. To explore these questions, she brought together a team of researchers to study a subset of literature in the research synthesis: literature on autism and employment.

Step 2: Focus on Constructs That Encompass a Topic of Interest

In Step 2, the review team determines the constructs it wants to explore, including its rationale for doing so. The first author noted that three of the 16 studies that met standards for inclusion in the research synthesis were about work for people with disabilities, but none was specifically about “work” for people
with “autism,” although two included participants with autism diagnoses. She wondered what possible understandings of work and autism the overall report and its literature base privileged and excluded.

For our CCS, we focused on the constructs of “work” (conceptualized as both an intervention and an outcome construct in the research synthesis) and “autism.” We chose to make these constructs focal given a global increase in the prevalence of autism diagnoses (Elsabbagh et al., 2012) and reported lower employment and compensation of people with autism in the United States as compared to other disability categories (Wehman et al., 2014). We argued that although literature examined the construction of autism in fiction literature (e.g., Hacking, 2009), its construction in the academic literature had not been investigated.

**Step 3: Replicate the Literature Search Strategy**

In Step 3, the review team identifies the original search strategy; determines, based on the constructs it wishes to explore, whether terms need to be added and/or eliminated; and replicates the search using the original databases.

The research synthesis reported the key terms and Boolean operators used to search the literature: disability (e.g., autism OR Asperger*), AND population (e.g., adolescent OR youth) AND outcome (e.g., work OR job OR employment) AND program (e.g., work experience OR supported employment) AND research design (e.g., RCT OR quasi-experimental). Because the original synthesis sought to synthesize literature for three postschool outcomes (employment, higher education, and independent living) for all youth with disabilities, we replicated the search for our CCS using only terms that would yield literature on work for youth with autism. We eliminated key terms in disability and outcome and program that were not associated with autism and employment to generate an initial set of primary literature germane to our review. That is, we removed disability key terms, such as intellectual disability; program terms, such as independent living; and outcome terms, such as higher education.

Although the original synthesis had a broader scope with regard to disability, intervention, and outcome, the methodologies it sought were only those with potential to meet WWC evidence standards (e.g., single-case designs, quasi-experimental designs, and randomized controlled trials). We therefore added key terms in research design, whose original set included only terms associated with quantitative studies, to capture conceptual and qualitative work (e.g., qualitative, commentary). We ran our literature search using the same databases (e.g., ERIC, PsycINFO, Medline) as the original review, which yielded 13,076 sources. Also duplicating the original review, we limited our search to only research published in peer-reviewed journals. We recognize this as a source of publication bias that is a limitation of the original review and a delimitation to the scope of our critique.

**Step 4: Screen Gathered Articles to Eliminate Works Off Topic**

In Step 4, the review team screens the articles identified in the search strategy following the original review parameters and, if applicable, narrowing those parameters based on the constructs the team chose to explore.

We began screening the 13,076 articles by first identifying only those that contained the words autism or Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD or Asperger’s Syndrome and work or employment or vocation or job or career either in their titles or abstracts. We chose to conduct this initial screen in order to more efficiently eliminate articles that were not of interest to our review and to yield a more manageable set of article abstracts to screen for a team of four researchers. This process left us with 2,738 articles. Consistent with the original review, we then screened the abstracts to identify articles that discussed work training or employment that did or could occur during high school. Also consistent, we defined (a) work as employment, vocation, or participation in paid or unpaid labor; (b) transition programs as including career training, career therapy, or counseling; and (c) youth as people between the ages of 13 and 22. We included literature about adults when it offered retrospective examinations of their work experiences as youth. As is typical in this stage of the review process, we erred on the side of inclusion. The abstract screen process resulted in 252 sources for which we conducted a full-text screen. The full-text screen yielded 62 articles for extraction.

**Step 5: Develop an Extraction Pro Forma**

In Step 5, the review team develops a pro forma to extract key information from the articles and capture all statements in the articles about the constructs of interest. Dixon-Woods and colleagues (2006) reported that the pro forma they developed for their CIS was ultimately impractical to use, especially for large documents, and wondered at the utility of formal data extraction for interpretive syntheses. Given the focused nature of CCS on specific constructs and the inclusion of only published articles in the original review, we felt a pro forma would help us identify features of articles and specific sections for later analysis.

Our pro forma, summarized in Table 2, included summary information about the article, including its purpose, methods, population studied, findings, and conclusions. It also included a section about methodology to enable us to analyze potential connections between methodology and constructions of autism and work. The remainder of the pro forma focused on the constructs of interest (autism, work, and the worker with autism). We used the pro forma to record positive and negative statements/definitions of autism, work, and the worker with autism. By positive and negative, we did not mean “good” and “bad” but meant statements about what autism/work is (positive) and what autism/work is not (negative). We also included spaces for notes on our initial impressions of the constructs and other observations.

**Step 6: Use the Pro Forma to Extract Information**

In Step 6, the research team uses the pro forma to extract relevant information about the articles and statements about the constructs of interest. This process will likely be iterative with Step 5; that is, several team members can use the first draft of the pro forma to extract one study, come together and discuss their
findings, identify commonalities, and potentially revise the pro forma to better suit their research aims. Step 6 is also likely to result in further elimination of articles based on the inclusion/exclusion criteria in Step 4.

We used our pro forma to extract information from the 62 articles that passed the full-text screen. We extracted the first eight articles as a team and met twice to share our extractions, reconcile differences, and discuss the pro forma. These initial extractions resulted in some revisions to the pro forma (e.g., we clarified what we meant by positive and negative). Once we felt confident in our process, we extracted the remaining 54 articles in pairs. The pairs conducted their extractions individually and then met to reconcile differences and create a final pro forma. During this time, we met biweekly as a team to discuss our progress and any questions or concerns. This process also resulted in the elimination of an additional 45 articles that did not meet the aims of the original review (e.g., employment studies conducted in postsecondary, instead of secondary, settings). A final set of 17 primary sources was included in our CCS.

Step 7: Analyze the Pro Forma and Full Texts

Up to this point, we have described CCS as more or less systematic, adopting the steps and processes common to many systematic reviews. In Step 7, the research team conducts the analysis of the constructs and their underlying assumptions, using both the pro forma and full texts. This includes identifying and comparing articles that were and were not included in the original synthesis. As noted above, this step is as variable as there exist approaches for analyzing text and its latent meanings, and the analysis technique selected will reflect the overarching philosophy (e.g., critical realist, poststructural) and the aim of the CCS. Theoretical literature in the field (in our case, disability studies) is engaged to think through the analysis and interpret findings. Reflexivity takes on a heightened importance during this step as the team reflects on its own assumptions about the constructs and the CCS process.

Our analysis involved a close reading and textual analysis of the articles and extractions, seeking to understand how they depicted autism, work, and the worker with autism. The philosophy undergirding our CCS was broadly critical, and therefore we used several of Gee's (2010) discourse analysis tools, including the significance-building tool and the identity-building tool, to critique what the articles featured and lessened as significant and the identities they made possible and prevented. Working with these tools, we categorized autism and work in a matrix with two spectra: from simple to complex and from asset to deficit. We developed this strategy based on Gee's (2000) view that discursive “identities can be placed on a continuum in terms of how active or passive one is in ‘recruiting’ them” (p. 104). In our analysis, a simple construction ignored intersections of identities (e.g., autism, class, race) in a unidimensional and easy-to-follow narrative of autism and work. A complex construction included multiple dimensions and intersections of autism and work—depicting them in a more tentative, detailed, and/or multiperspectival narrative. Deficit constructions depicted autism or work in negative terms (e.g., students [situated] on the autism spectrum are lacking in social skills), whereas asset constructions depicted autism or work more positively (e.g., students [situated] on the autism spectrum are good visual learners).

Next, to understand what the constructions of autism and work said about the worker with autism, we grouped articles that seemed to put forward similar constructions of autism and work (e.g., simple deficit accounts of autism, simple asset accounts of work) and asked if there was a common story being built and, if so, how. This process resulted in two major stories and variants. The first, intervention story, identified autism as a problem for which people on the autism spectrum needed treatment to render them useful as workers to society. Work in the intervention story was usually presented as a set of discrete skills or tasks. Complex stories, in contrast, invited positive accounts of autism and broader notions of work that problematized the intervention story. Connecting research methodologies to constructs, we
noted that only two of the 17 primary sources in our CCS met standards for inclusion in the original research synthesis based on their designs (quasi-experiment and single subject). Both were coded as intervention stories, which discussed the impact of interventions on observable and/or measurable outcomes and drew on behaviorist principles to conduct the interventions.

We read the articles and conducted the extractions individually and in pairs, and the process of coming to and interpreting the two stories occurred during biweekly team meetings over the course of several months. During this time, we read widely about the social construction of autism, critiques of neoliberalism, and discourses of social science. On the basis of our readings, and consistent with our critical orientation, we interpreted the constructions of autism and work and stories in terms of broader sociopolitical (e.g., neoliberal, disability) and academic (e.g., postpositivist) discourses. In particular, we relied on critical disability literature that emphasized the social construction of disability alongside neoliberal accounts of work, literature that critiques describing people with disabilities in terms of their productivity (e.g., McKenzie, 2013).

Reflexivity. Throughout the abstract screen, extraction, and analysis processes and into the writing phase, we discussed and reflected on our individual and collective assumptions about work and autism. This reflection informed the aim of our inquiry, how we approached our analysis, and the terms we chose to use in our write-up. We became aware of the ways our writing and talk constructed particular versions of autism and work. Through reflective conversations, we became clear about the constructions we wanted to privilege—critical, discursive ones that would challenge essential, humanist, and neoliberal accounts of disability and work. For example, we began our conversations using “people-first” language (i.e., students with autism) to place the person ahead of the disability. However, we became concerned this humanist language was not aligned with our readings of the disability studies literature that theorize autism as a social construction produced in systems of power. We wanted our conversations and write-up to suggest that autism is a constructed condition that shapes presumptions and identities about who one is/can become. Therefore, we adopted the phrase (situated) on the autism spectrum to emphasize the constructive power of language, relationships, and labels, such as autism.

Step 8: Write Up the CCS Report

The final step in CCS is the report write-up. Here researchers decide on the structure, style, and voice of their report. Should the manuscript be written more traditionally or experimentally? Should it include or seek to downplay the research team’s perspectives and experiences conducting the review? Should it be written in first person or third? As in most research dissemination deliberations, these decisions will be made in light of the anticipated venue (e.g., brief report, academic journal) and audience (e.g., policymakers, other researchers).

Our CCS write-up was first a conference paper presented at the American Educational Research Association. Like many synthesis write-ups, it was a lengthy, including three tables describing the features of all 17 primary sources and an appended pro forma. Because we hoped to reach those who study autism and might be open, if not sympathetic, to a critical approach, we targeted a prominent disability studies journal for publication. This meant our 60-page manuscript had to be cut in half. We deleted most of the tables and the pro forma and made them available as supplemental material; we also cut descriptions of our methodology and worked elsewhere to streamline our introduction, findings, and conclusions. The result was that the final manuscript we submitted looked less like a traditional systematic review write-up, which often involves in-depth descriptions of methods, and included primary literature (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Still, we chose to write up our CCS fairly conventionally, including introduction, methods, results, and discussion sections, to facilitate navigation. Whether this is the best way to approach the CCS write-up is something we continue to wonder about, especially in light of the connections CCS can illuminate between the norms of academic writing and the kinds of understandings write-ups produce. In the conclusion section of our CCS write-up, we recommended academics experiment with writing in ways that engender less restrictive and more positive accounts of work for youth situated on the autism spectrum. We suggested CCS reviewers might also play with form and content in their write-ups to attend to the constructions of constructs they enable.

Discussion

Critically examining constructs in scholarly literature is important for understanding underlying assumptions about what counts as good education and for whom. Empirical evidence derived from experimental research can provide information about “what works” but always underdetermines the answer in the final analysis. Practitioners, policymakers, and scholars need more than this information to make sense of what works in education (Donmoyer, 2012). We argue a broader understanding is needed, an understanding that is aware of the productive power of research, the hermeneutic circles in which research is produced, and the possibilities of reframing educational problems and their solutions. We introduce CCS as a methodology for unpacking constructs in research syntheses. We do so to promote a “better” research synthesis, one that does not take constructs at face value and takes seriously the ways in which review methodologies (inclusion and exclusion decisions) construct and privilege some accounts over others.

Inclusionary and exclusionary methodological decisions are grounded in disciplinary and sociopolitical assumptions about what should count as “valid” research. Findings produced by any research synthesis are constituted within these assumptions, and exploring excluded evidence reveals the implications of those decisions, showing what might be found and known under a different set of assumptions about what evidence counts. CCS reveals the implications of these methodological elimination decisions by comparing assumptions about constructs in included and excluded literature. It asks, What methodologies entail particular understandings at the exclusion of others? What might be thought, concluded, recommended differently? How might problems and solutions be reframed?

In the example CCS, we noted that only two of our 17 primary sources were eligible for inclusion in the original research
synthesis based on their designs (quasi-experiment and single case). These were both coded in our CCS as intervention stories that explored the impact of interventions on observable or measurable outcomes and drew on behaviorism to design and conduct the interventions (Wolgemuth et al., 2016). The intervention stories depicted autism in deficit terms and work narrowly as a set of tasks for hourly pay. Absent from the research synthesis, and found in our CCS, were primary sources that discussed autism as a form of neurodiversity or in strengths-based terms. Also absent from the research synthesis and found in our CCS were primary sources that discussed work as an individual right, a career, activism, or unpaid labor. We worry about the limited and rather bleak understandings of people with disabilities and their life possibilities enabled by a research synthesis of studies that met criteria for inclusion. We worry, alongside others (cf. Van Cleave, 2012) critical of “scientifically based research,” that “narrow definitions of research or science [in research syntheses] might trivialize rather than enrich our understanding of education policy and practice” (Feuer, Towne, & Shavelson, 2002, p. 4).

The aim of CCS is not to demonstrate that research syntheses should not be conducted or that all systematic reviews should be as inclusive as possible. Instead, the aim is to empirically trace and reveal the limitations of exclusionary decisions in order to inform a more tentative, critical, and contextualized understanding of the terms and conclusions produced in research syntheses. Constructs are indispensable to scholarly inquiry, but using them without understanding both their history and the work they do may produce unnecessarily limited understandings on which to base policy and practice decisions. Through CCS, we can better understand connections between research designs, constructs we use, and their potential effects, with the aim to reveal how research synthesis might not yield best ethics—optimistic accounts of people that reframe their “problems” and open up possibilities for their lives.

NOTE

1Following Cooper and Hedges (2009), we use the term research synthesis to refer to systematic reviews that “attempt to integrate empirical [quantitative] research for the purpose of creating generalizations” (p. 6). We describe critical construct synthesis as a systematic review method particularly well suited to interrogate constructs in research syntheses that exclude primary literature based method on methodological criteria.

REFERENCES


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