



## STITCHING TOGETHER RESEARCH METHODS: A PROPOSAL FOR EPISTEMIC- INTEGRATION OF SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW WITH GADAMERIAN HERMENEUTICS AND REFLECTIVE THEMATIC ANALYSIS

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### Abstract

This article proposes an epistemic integration framework for Systematic Literature Review (SLR), incorporating principles from philosophical hermeneutics as articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, in conjunction with Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) guidelines. Sebastian K. Boell and Dubravka Cecez-Kecmanovic's concept of hermeneutic circles serves as the basis for connecting the stages of SLR with Gadamerian hermeneutics. These stages are delineated within both the circle of search and acquisition (CSA) and the circle of analysis and interpretation (CAI). The application of hermeneutics necessitated the establishment of a meticulous data organization system for textual analysis. To achieve this, the analytical procedures employed to interpret the SLR research *corpus* closely followed the directives outlined by Michael E. Patterson and Daniel R. Williams for hermeneutic analysis, as well as the procedural steps of RTA. The systematic alignment of RTA steps with CAI tasks facilitated the methodical implementation of two Gadamerian principles: the “hermeneutic circle” and the “fusion of horizons”.

Keywords: Systematic Review of Literature; Hans-George Gadamer, Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

### 1. Introduction

General guidelines for conducting systematic reviews frequently advocate a stringent protocol for literature search and appraisal. Such protocol is claimed to be a standardized method, characterized by its replicability, transparency, objectivity, and rigour (Tight, 2019). In certain instances, these guidelines encapsulate inquiries concerning the integration of qualitative aspects within the analytic process. This pattern is evident across various fields of knowledge, particularly within the domain of organisational and management research. The works of Amjad, Kordel e Fernandes (2023), and Sauer e Seuring (2023) exemplify this viewpoint. Nonetheless, the protocols



often overlook the epistemic justification for qualitative approaches, failing to present reasons or evidence to support their adoption. Significant collateral consequences, which have largely gone unnoticed in this domain, undoubtedly exist. In the midst of them, three stand out prominently: a) it lacks any epistemic foundation on which to substantiate the selection of a qualitative method; b) it complicates the understanding of how knowledge is attainable and subsequently derived through systematic review analysis; c) therefore, the trustworthiness of knowledge cannot be assessed.

This paper does not intend to address all sort of questions regarding the epistemic justification of every qualitative method in systematic reviews. This would be a daunting task. Our intention here is modest, yet ambitious. This article introduces a proposition for the epistemic integration of Systematic Literature Review (hereafter referred to as SLR), with Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutic principles, especially as outlined in his seminal work "Truth and Method", and the guidelines of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (henceforth RTA) formulated by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. In doing so, it endeavours to epistemically justify a potential pathway to integrate them.

In organizational research, hermeneutics is both a philosophical stance and a method within qualitative research (Barrett, Powley e Pearce, 2011; Myers, 2016). In this article, we approach hermeneutics as a research method, highlighting its epistemic connections with systematic review while acknowledging its philosophical principles. Hermeneutics is a qualitative method closely associated with the interpretivist tradition (Gillo, 2021). According to Mason e May (2020), hermeneutics "[...] is concerned with interpretation". Here, method serves as a rationale for justification rather than just a technique, encompassing fundamental philosophical assumptions that guide its conception as a technique (Smith e Heshusius, 1986). This understanding aligns with the approach to method in empirical scientific research, involving various techniques, procedures, and tools for planning, designing, executing, and analysing data (Smith e Heshusius, 1986). Drawing upon such perspective, the Gadamerian variant of hermeneutics may align methodologically with interpretive research (Paterson e Higgs, 2005), thereby the configurative systematic literature review.

Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic's (2014) notion of hermeneutic circles is employed to establish a linkage between the stages of SRL and Gadamerian hermeneutics. The SLR's stages are outlined within both the Circle of Search and Acquisition (CSA) and the Circle of Analysis and Interpretation (CAI). Hermeneutics necessitated the development of a data organization system for textual analysis. The analytical procedures used to interpret the SLR research *corpus* closely adhered to the directives depicted by Patterson e Williams (2002) in their hermeneutic analysis, as well as the steps of RTA. The systematic integration of RTA steps with CAI tasks has bolstered the methodical application of several Gadamerian principles and concepts, with two in particular standing out: the "hermeneutic circle" and the "fusion of horizons".

In addition to this introduction, the structure of the article consists of four sections. The Systematic Review section furnishes a definition of SRL and identifies a type of it



that aligns epistemically with Gadamerian hermeneutics. Following this, Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics is unveiled. Subsequently, the concept and steps of Reflexive Thematic Analysis are exhibited, along with its alignment with SRL and such hermeneutics. These three sections lay the groundwork for justifying and facilitating collaboration between the methods under consideration. The final section delineates the epistemic integration of these methods.

## 2. The Systematic Review

The systematic literature review is regarded as one of the documentary research methods, as per Tight (2019). According to Kitchenham e Charters (2007, p. 3), SLR is:

[...] a [rigorous] method for identifying, evaluating, and interpreting all relevant available research for a specific research question, topic area, or phenomenon of interest. Individual studies contributing to a systematic review are called *primary* studies; a systematic review is a form of *secondary* study

The method is characterised by meticulousness and systematic adherence to methodological guidelines to ensure rigour in scientific investigation. The SLR entails “[...] a clear stated purpose, a question, a defined search approach, stating inclusion and exclusion criteria, producing a qualitative appraisal of [documents]” (Jesson, Matheson e Lacey, 2011, p. 12). In procedural terms, systematic reviews “[...] emphasize a priori protocols, comprehensive searches, transparency to reduce biases [...] in its process (Suri e Clarke, 2009, p. 397). A systematic review aims to systematically identify, review, and synthesise available evidence concerning a specific theme, topic, or phenomenon. The SLR encompasses a series of scientific procedures aimed at understanding a specific phenomenon, solely through the examination of documents (Kutsyuruba, 2023). Here, a document is defined as a written text, published in printed and/or electronic format (Bowen, 2009; Morgan, 2022). Documents are manipulated “[...] to provide information or evidence<sup>1</sup>” (Dolowitz, Burckler e Sweeney, 2008, p. 39), capable of substantiating the analysis and comprehension of a phenomenon (Tight, 2019).

Amidst a plethora of SLR applicable to social scientific studies (Tight, 2019), the configurative review (shortly abbreviated as CR) aligns with the tradition of qualitative-interpretative research. According to Oliver e Tripney (2017), CR adopts an idealist stance, underpinned by the belief in a collectively shared world of understandings. This review is closely associated with interpretivist methodologies, focusing on theorization (Gough, Thomas e Oliver, 2012). The configurative review utilizes interactive research methodologies to delve into and elucidate specific inquiries regarding the significance of documents, with the aim of investigating and/or theorizing about a phenomenon (Gough, Thomas e Oliver, 2012). Oliver e Tripney (2017) suggest that CR is suitable for

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<sup>1</sup> Evidence comprise information unearthed and extracted from documents (Tight, 2019).



identifying and exploring patterns, meanings, and values derived from the heterogeneity of materials, without necessarily aiming to exhaustively collect and analyse documents. The scientific rigour of this review does not mandate the inclusion or analysis of all published evidence on a particular phenomenon (Tight, 2019).

Whilst configurative reviews often have their basic methodology “[...] determined (or at least assumed) in advance” (Gough, Thomas e Oliver, 2012, p. 3), they maintain an exploratory stance. CR often involve the adaptation and selection of specific methods as the research progresses (Armstrong, Brown e Chapman, 2020). This review entails exploring conceptual variations and the complexity of the phenomenon under investigation, rather than striving for a singular, definitive answer (Gough, Thomas e Oliver, 2012). It seeks to elucidate concepts and “[...] provide enlightenment through novel ways of understandings (Gough, Thomas e Oliver, 2012, p. 3). CR facilitates the comprehension of an existing phenomenon and its new manifestations, without the aim of instrumentally informing *a priori* empirical statements.

Drawing from this description, we argue that configurative reviews adopt an “inductive bottom-up approach” (Shepherd e Sutcliffe, 2011). To interpret and understand the world, CR endeavours to interpret and organize information, as much as to develop concepts and ultimately theories (Gough, Thomas e Oliver, 2012). Due to its inductive reasoning, a bottom-up approach to theorizing derives knowledge from “[...] empirical experience based upon a system of handling [...] data (Shepherd e Sutcliffe, 2011). This approach commences at the juncture of a theorist’s “general curiosity” and raw data, says Shepherd e Sutcliffe (2011). Such curiosity provides the essential impetus for theorizing, although it may not necessarily prompt a quest for compelling enquiries or elaborate techniques, particularly if one allows the data to speak for itself. Theorists who embrace this approach commonly adopt a stance of “unknowing”, fostering openness and vitality to the concept or idea, thereby potentially allowing theory to emerge from the data. CR’s inductive approach focus on substantially advancing theory and pioneering new perspectives (Alvesson e Sandberg, 2013).

Configurative reviews are not entirely or purely inductive, so to speak. It “[...] may include some components where data are aggregated” (Gough, Thomas e Oliver, 2012, p. 4). This implies that the interpretation<sup>2</sup> is partly developed inductively, either “[...] from the emerging literature” or “[...] through a sampling framework based on an existing body of literature” (Gough, Thomas e Oliver, 2012, p. 3). we contend that the configurative review exhibits a partially inductive nature (Leão, Mello e Vieira, 2009). Theory was employed as a tool to furnish context, a lens for interpreting the phenomenon, and identifying its empirical categories, without these being fully established *a priori* (Leão, Mello e Vieira, 2009). Theories and interpretations of a phenomenon are adjusted in response to emerging evidence from research progress (Gough, Oliver e Thomas, 2017).

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<sup>2</sup> The notions of interpretation, understanding, and comprehension are used interchangeably in this paper.



Given that understanding the meaning of a document inherently involves grasping its context, incorporating inductive reasoning into configurative reviews requires an approach rooted in a pre-existing theoretical framework relevant to the phenomenon of interest (Bowen, 2009). Existing literature serves as a cornerstone for guiding researchers' preliminary investigations and subsequently conducting an analysis of the phenomenon at hand. Scholars' reflections stem from evidence extracted from documents, rather than from previous concepts or theories (Braun *et al.*, 2017).

After delineating the characteristics of the systematic-configurative review, I now elucidate the principles of Hans-George Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics that steered the approach to interpreting the documents, thereby informing theorization. In the subsequent section, my intention is not to provide a comprehensive review of all aspects of the Gadamerian hermeneutical method, but rather to weave together some of its specific elements as analytical principles for understanding a phenomenon.

### **3. Hans-George Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics**

Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics takes an interpretivist stance, rather than an objectivist one. This suggesting that understanding a text "[...] is not simply there, its true nature waiting to be discovered: it must be constructed in the process of reading" (Connolly e Keutner, 1988, p. 17). Gadamer (2004) rejects the idea of a singular, correct, or definitive interpretation, emphasizing ongoing interpretation of a text. Genuine engagement with reading requires recognizing the intersubjective nature of understanding and fostering reflective interaction with a text (Gadamer, 2005).

Whilst Gadamerian hermeneutics is rooted in the interpretative tradition (Vlăduțescu, 2018), its anti-foundationalism offers a unique perspective in the social sciences (Hekman, 1984). In "Truth and Method", Gadamer redefines the positivist-interpretive dichotomy, proposing that understanding merges the interpreter's horizon with the text's horizons (Gadamer, 2004). He refutes the assumption that our understanding must be anchored in an indisputable element of social reality. This challenges the notion of truth as correspondence between theory and reality, advocating instead that prejudice and previous judgments shape all interpretations (Hekman, 1984).

Gadamer contests the epistemological primacy of the knowing subject, a cornerstone of interpretive social sciences (Hekman, 1984). He rejects the confinement of textual explanations to interpretations solely dictated by the interpreter. He also opposes the positivist conception of scientific method, which disregards meanings attributed by actors (Hekman, 1984). In his view, positivists err by negating the role of the interpreter in shaping action (Gadamer, 2004). Conversely, he challenges the interpretive social scientists who struggle to provide a compelling rationale for imposing the interpreter's conceptual framework. Gadamerian hermeneutics legitimises the fusion of both horizons during the interpretation process (Myers, 2016). The dichotomous distinction between the interpreter and the object is incongruous with its ontological and



epistemological commitments, namely, the mutual constitution of reality and the fusion of horizons, respectively (Patterson e Williams, 2002)

Gadamer (2004) posits that hermeneutics encompasses more than a method; it embodies a dynamic set of principles guiding humanity's quest for truth through the complexities of language. Language, in his view, constitutes a pre-interpretative status of the world shaping our understanding of it. Language stands as an indispensable component of understanding. All interpretations fundamentally rely upon language (Gadamer, 2004). Our experiences of absolute historicity, temporality and being-in-the-world arise from and is primarily shaped by language (Gadamer, 2005). Gadamer emphasizes that the world is not immediately given. It requires prior interpretation to be understood. Language is a mediator between humanity's finite historical context and the world. It facilitates individuals' comprehension of themselves and their interactions with others. Language reveals itself as a universal ontological structure. Consequently, it becomes a vital conduit for uncovering the truth inherent in objects, suggesting that truth is contingent upon linguistic expression (Gadamer, 2004).

In the Gadamerian perspective, interpretation emerges subsequent to language acquisition. Interpretation constitutes a fundamental aspect of his hermeneutics (Vlăduțescu, 2018). The process of understanding commences “[...] when something addresses us” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 298). It encompasses being called upon by something. To grasp the meaning of a text, Gadamer (2004) proposes that we must internalize its significance. If that is the case, we must construct our own interpretations of things. A primary critique of his hermeneutics concerns its overly subjective and relativistic nature (Myers, 2016). Given our inherent subjectivity in text interpretation, how do we mitigate the risk of succumbing to pure relativism?

Gadamer counters such a critique by addressing a key concern in his hermeneutic system: the truthfulness of interpretation. He rejects the idea that a text's meaning is solely subjective to interpreter's feelings and judgments or confined to the author's intentions (Gadamer, 2005). The text doesn't hold a single horizon of truth; rather, it opens up to new horizons of interpretation. According to Gadamerian hermeneutics, “[t]he keys to understanding are not manipulation and control but participation and openness, not knowledge but experience, not methodology but dialectic” (Palmer, 1980, p. 216). Since accessing the author's intended meaning is often elusive, interpretation becomes a dialogue between interpreter and text, leading to a fusion of horizons (Gadamer, 2005). His concept of horizon is a metaphor for the manner we perceive and interpret reality (Simms, 2015), representing “[...] the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 301). This epistemic notion of horizon underscores the context-dependent nature of knowledge, highlighting the openness and dynamism of both the interpreter's and the text's horizons (Palmer, 1980).

The essence of dialogue lies in its interplay of questioning and answering between horizons (Gadamer, 2004). Gadamer's concept of dialectic interaction is reflected in the mutual interrogation between the interpreter and the text (Mason e May, 2020). Gadamer (2004, p. 370) claims that dialectic “[...] makes understanding appear to be a reciprocal



relationship of the same kind as conversation”. Dialogue fosters an ongoing integrative experience, offering opportunities for interpreters to expand their horizons through engagement with the text (Gadamer, 2004). He asserts that “[i]t is true that a text does not speak to us in the same way as does a Thou. We who are attempting to understand must ourselves make it” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 370).

The core idea of Gadamerian dialogue is to expand the interpreter’s horizons as they engage with the text (Gadamer, 2005). Through questioning and response, his initial narrow perspective may evolve, revealing new horizons (Simms, 2015). The interpreter extends their horizon towards the text by integrating his context and historical viewpoint onto it. The fusion of horizons fosters openness to change, shaping the interpreter’s understanding of the text and altering the text’s horizon (Regan, 2012). This fusion validates the interpreter’s conceptual framework while acknowledging the text’s constitutive role (Vlăduțescu, 2018). According to Gadamer (2004), truth emerges from the fusion of horizons, which is provisional and contingent upon a horizon. Dialogue facilitates the emergence of a truth, rather than the truth itself, as it transcends any specific method (Regan, 2012). Truth, for him, is not a method but rather the outcome of dialogue. Interpretation entails continual dialogues wherein provisional meanings undergo scrutiny and redefinition upon encountering diverse horizons (Gadamer, 2005).

In a dialogue between the interpreter and the text, Gadamer (2004) stresses that any interpretation must acknowledge the tradition, historicity, and preconceptions inherent in both parties. If all interpretations can be expressed in text, and this expression refers to experience, then the knowledge derived from experience can be verified (Gadamer, 2004). For him, true propositions emerge from interpreting proposition that are recognized with certainty and identified through the principle of “historically effected consciousness”. This consciousness delineates the conditions of understanding, as it requires acknowledgement of the authority of tradition (Tatievskaya, 2012).

Interpretation, as Gadamer (2005) comments, is a cognition of truth, grounded on tradition (Gadamer, 2004). In Gadamerian hermeneutics, tradition encompasses the cultural norms and authority’s imprint transmitted to us, often with the (Regan, 2012). Tradition is the benchmark for correctness in understanding (Tatievskaya, 2012). It transmits the interests, preconceptions, questions, and issues that shape interpretations and thereby foster knowledge. He does not advocate for a conservative approach to tradition. Its entirety should not be blindly affirmed. While acknowledging the impossibility of interpreting the world detached from tradition, he argues against an uncritical attitude towards it. Tradition offers the tools for its own scrutiny, interrogation, and change (Palmer, 1980).

Tradition and historicity constitute the bedrock and prerequisite of knowledge, our understanding of the world and ourselves, states Gadamer (2004). From the Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutic, the question of truth involves considerations of historicity (Simms, 2015). Interpretations unfold within a historical milieu, that is, our personal history and experiences shape our understanding of texts (Simms, 2015). Following this, Gadamer’s hermeneutic, as a research method, proves especially



conducive to generating fresh interpretations and challenging prevailing conceptions of phenomena, whilst “things” historically and temporally grounded in a context (Hekman, 1984; Myers, 2016).

The tradition embodies an “effective historical consciousness” formed within a linguistic community (Gadamer, 2004). Interpretation makes a specific subject comprehensible within the boundaries of a certain horizon, preserving its distinctive significance (Regan, 2012). The fusion of horizons invariably occurs during the interpreting process (Gadamer, 2004). Understanding entails interpreting the past, alongside a sort of application of the text being understood to the interpreter’s present situation (Gadamer, 2004). Tradition mediates how meaning is created and transmitted over time. Individuals’ actions and expressions can only be properly grasped within their respective contexts (Gadamer, 2004). Interpretation, as Gadamer elucidates (2004), invariably entails some prior knowledge or expectation regarding the subject matter addressed by the text. Within Gadamerian hermeneutics, the *praejudicium* stands as an indispensable and intrinsic condition to understanding that persists as previous conceptions even after the interpreter has reflected upon the text (Vlăduțescu, 2018). The term *praejudicium* denotes the preconceived judgments, assumptions, biases, and prejudices originating from traditions, whether positive or negative (Gadamer, 2004). Such preconceptions do not solely stem from an interpreter’s personal inclinations but are grounded in tradition and historicity.

Gadamer contends that a primary objective of hermeneutics is to distinguish “[...] the true prejudices, by which we understand, from the false ones, by which we misunderstand” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 298). Suspending *praejudicium*, he asserts, is indispensable for grasping a text’s meaning. This does not entail “putting into brackets” our prejudices and preconceptions, but rather acknowledging our own historicity (Gadamer, 2004). Interpreters actively shape the meaning of a text during the textual analysis. They must recognize their own *praejudicium* to understand how they influence interpretation (Regan, 2012). This underscores two restrictive conditions in text interpretation: a) an inability to read a text with a completely innocent and neutral mindset; b) the impracticality of fully grasping its horizon (Patterson e Williams, 2002). By acknowledging these constraints, interpreters are urged to critically assess their *praejudicium* (Gadamer, 2004). Critical engagement between interpreter and text is crucial for meaningful dialogue (Myers, 2016).

Gadamer emphasizes the importance of context in understanding a text, describing interpretation as a circular process, “[...] a movement back and forth between parts and whole [...]” (Barrett, Powley e Pearce, 2011, p. 184). This concept, known as the hermeneutic circle, is a central ontological aspect to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics (Grondin, 2016). Similar to Heidegger, Gadamer employs the metaphor of the hermeneutic circle “[...] to describe the experience of moving dialectically between the part and the whole” (Koch, 1996, p. 176). It is a dialectical interplay between understanding the text as a whole and interpreting its individual components, with descriptions being informed by foreseen elucidations (Gadamer, 1988). The circle



symbolizes a collaborative, cyclical, and interpretative process wherein the interpreter and the text converge, resulting in a fusion of horizons (Patterson e Williams, 2002). As he puts it, the hermeneutic circle is “[...] a circular relationship in both cases. The anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 291). Its dynamic process enhances the interpreter’s comprehension of the text.

In the hermeneutic circle, understanding moves continuously between the whole and its parts (Gadamer, 1988). Full comprehension of a text’s constitutive parts requires an understanding of its whole, and vice versa. Assertions about the meaning of the entire text are substantiated by the insight gained from understanding the meanings of its individual parts. Each element of a text finds support and validation in relation to the overarching structure of the whole (Crotty, 1998).

According to the logic of this circle, each interpretation entails a dynamic oscillation between envisaging the text’s meaning in its entirety and interpreting specific passages (Gadamer, 1970). The part-whole dialectic — or the harmonization of individual interpretations with broader anticipations — is crucial for the communication process. He contends that the social scientist should initially embark on a holistically interpretation of the text’s meaning (Gadamer, 2004). Through introspection, interpretations can be refined and elaborated upon. The hermeneutic process entails an ongoing comprehension of the parts in relation to a speculative conception of the whole, potentially reshaping the latter in light of a deeper understanding of the former (Gadamer, 2004). Achieving a cohesive meaning requires detailed knowledge of the parts without losing sight of totality.

The following section elaborates on the concept of reflexive thematic analysis and its alignment with systematic literature review from a hermeneutic perspective.

#### 4. Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) is, a “[...] theoretically flexible interpretative approach to qualitative data analysis that facilitates the identification and analysis of patterns or themes in a given data set” (Byrne, 2022, p. 1392). It aims to identify, organize, and interpret dominant patterns of meaning (i.e., themes) in a research corpus through the textual analysis (Braun *et al.*, 2019). Unlike a methodology, RTA is an analytic method (Braun e Clarke, 2006). It does not impose specific theoretical assumptions and research questions, or ideal methods of data collection, offering adaptability across qualitative paradigms (Clarke *et al.*, 2019). Its procedures accommodate diverse philosophical orientations, emphasizing “[...] researcher subjectivity, organic and recursive coding processes, and the importance of deep reflection on, and engagement with, data” (Braun e Clarke, 2019, p. 593). This flexibility renders RTA to be utilized across various qualitative theoretical frameworks and research inquiries, encompassing many ontological and epistemological perspectives (Clarke *et al.*, 2019).



The flexibility inherent in RTA does not imply a lack of methodical procedures to ensure thorough engagement with documents (Terry *et al.*, 2017), thereby facilitating the generation of meaningful insights into phenomena (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). RTA comprises a six-phase analytic process: i) familiarizing with data; ii) generating codes; iii) constructing themes; iv) reviewing candidate themes; v) defining and naming themes; vi) producing the report (Braun e Clarke, 2006). This process should be conducted interactively, reflectively, and recursively (Clarke *et al.*, 2019).

Familiarization “[...] is about generating very early and provisional analytic ideas, and this requires being curious, and asking questions of the data” (Terry *et al.*, 2017, p. 24). It marks the initial phase of data analysis, facilitating immersive engagement with the research *corpus* (Braun e Clarke, 2006). This phase focuses on developing a deep familiarity with the *corpus*, enabling profound involvement and insights to attain a comprehensive contextual understanding of the documents (Terry *et al.*, 2017). It involves actively reading the entire *corpus*, identifying patterns or idiosyncrasies, and initiating inquiries, rather than passively absorbing information (Braun *et al.*, 2019).

After developing a sense of the overall *corpus*, the next phase is generating codes (Braun e Clarke, 2006). Coding is the systematic and thorough creation of meaningful labels attached to significant segments of the dataset relevant to the research question (Terry *et al.*, 2017). These segments are fragments or passages, comprehensible on their own within a document, that provide pertinent information to understand specific aspects of the phenomenon under investigation (Braun *et al.*, 2019). Coding should be open, iterative, and inclusive, assigning concise labels to segments throughout the entire set of documents (Braun *et al.*, 2017). Codes may evolve during labelling, varying in their capacity to capture different aspects of the *corpus*, serving as fundamental building blocks for themes (Clarke *et al.*, 2019).

The third phase entails generating themes, which are abstract entities or ideas organized around central concepts, notions, or codes (Braun *et al.*, 2019). This phase involves actively forming patterns and identifying clusters of systematic meaning within the *corpus* (Terry *et al.*, 2017). It shifts focus from interpreting individual data items to interpreting aggregated meaning and significance across the *corpus* (Byrne, 2022). By reviewing and analysing coded data, researchers explore how codes with shared meanings can be combined to form themes or sub-themes (Byrne, 2022). This process often comprises identifying similarities and relationships across multiple codes, which are then clustered into potential themes (Terry *et al.*, 2017).

Theme development is “[...] a productive, iterative, [and] reflective process of data-engagement [...]” that “[...] first involves examining codes (and associated data), and combining, clustering or collapsing codes together into bigger or more meaningful patterns” (Terry *et al.*, 2017, p. 27). Themes represent patterns of meaning in a text, often encapsulating abstract entities or ideas that capture implicit, and sometimes explicit, meanings within documents (Braun *et al.*, 2019). It’s important to note that themes are not inherently present in the data, but rather actively constructed by the researcher through analysing relationships among different codes and their contribution to the narrative of a



particular theme. Ensuring coherence and relevance, themes communicate meaningful insights that address the research question(s) (Braun *et al.*, 2017).

At this phase, themes are compiled into initial “candidate themes” (Terry *et al.*, 2017). These are provisional and may be discarded if they do not effectively serve as meaningful interpretations of the data or fail to provide information relevant to addressing the research question(s) (Byrne, 2022). A thematic map of the initial candidate themes serves as a tool that facilitates the process of identifying and understanding potential patterns among them. In short, such tool “[...] provide a way of identifying what the boundaries of, and the relationships between, each theme might be, as well as how different themes work together to tell an overall story about the data” (Terry *et al.*, 2017, p. 28).

The fourth phase comprises reviewing potential themes. It is a recursive process that assesses candidate themes in relation to coded-data items and the entire corpus (Braun e Clarke, 2021). Described as a “quality control exercise” (Terry *et al.*, 2017, p. 29), this phase ensures themes align well with the coded data, dataset, and research question, reflecting accurately both coded segments and the *corpus* (Braun *et al.*, 2017). Some themes may need refinement, clarification, or rejection, with reviewers assessing if they effectively capture the meaning in the coded-data segments (Terry *et al.*, 2017). Adjustments to themes or the thematic map may be required, and researchers might even restart theme development from scratch at this stage (Terry *et al.*, 2017).

The fifth phase encompasses defining and naming themes. It focuses on presenting an analytic narrative of each theme and sub-theme to ensure clarity, cohesion, precision, and quality in thematic analysis (Terry *et al.*, 2017). This phase aims to “[...] to move away from a summative position (thinking about these themes as lists of codes and collated data) to an interpretative orientation” (Terry *et al.*, 2017, p. 30), constructing a clear narrative that elucidates patterns and variations in theme meanings (Braun *et al.*, 2019). Theme definitions provide concise summaries of each theme’s central idea and significance, ensuring coherence and internal consistency across the *corpus* (Terry *et al.*, 2017). The final phase entails completing and inspecting “[...] the report that the researcher would most likely have begun writing before even undertaking their thematic analysis”, requiring a recursive approach as codes, themes, and interpretations may evolve during the write-up stage (Byrne, 2022, p. 1429).

The phases of RTA are designed to align with the paradigmatic assumptions of systematic configurative review (CR) and Gadamerian hermeneutics. This alignment, rooted in RTA’s partially inductive nature (Braun e Clarke, 2006), facilitates the representation and analysis of textual data (Terry *et al.*, 2017) within qualitative-interpretivist research. Similar to CR, these phases generate a comprehensive depiction of predominant themes extracted from textual analysis of a research corpus (Clarke *et al.*, 2019), providing insights relevant to the research topic.

RTA and CR also converge in their data-driven analytical processes, both starting with a “bottom-up” approach grounded in document data to construct textual meaning (Braun e Clarke, 2021). They rely on document content to identify and interpret clusters



of standardized meaning, rather than solely on pre-existing concepts and theories (Braun *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, RTA aligns with Gadamerian hermeneutics, emphasizing the: a) researcher's subjectivity and their active involvement in the knowledge construction process; b) recognition of multiple realities; c) iterative analysis; d) deep reflection; e) openness to novelty; f) inductive reasoning; g) contextualized nature of meaning (Braun e Clarke, 2019).

The next section outlines a systematic framework for organizing and assessing data in textual analysis of a research corpus, integrating SLR with Gadamerian hermeneutics and ATR.

## 5. A proposal for an epistemic integration framework for Systematic Literature Review

The systematic literature review (SLR) follows a structured framework outlined by Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey (2011). The SLR process involves six key stages: Stage 1 – Scoping review, Stage 2 – Comprehensive search, Stage 3 – Quality assessment, Stage 4 – Data extraction, Stage 5 – Synthesis, and Stage 6 – Report writing. These stages are aligned with the phases proposed by Kitchenham and Charters (2007): a) planning, b) execution, and conclusion. Figure 1 illustrates these stages.

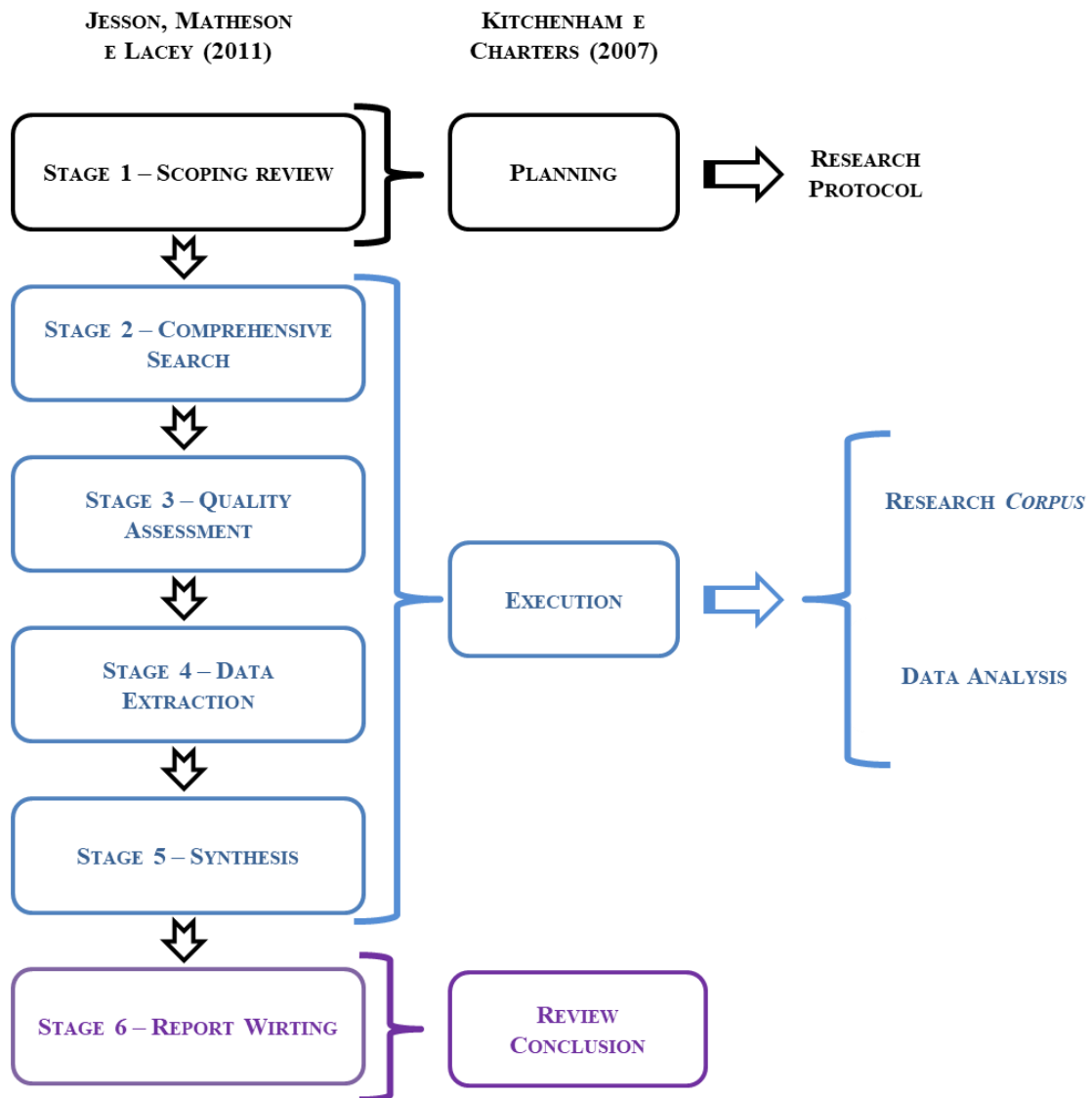
Stage 1, as per Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey (2011), corresponds to the planning phase detailed by Kitchenham and Charters (2007). This initial stage focuses on establishing the research protocol, which includes formulating research questions, defining search strings and methods, identifying research sources, and setting inclusion and exclusion criteria for documents, as well as criteria for assessing document quality.

Stages 2 through 5 comprise the execution of the review. The second and third stages encompass activities such as conducting searches in digital libraries, applying inclusion and exclusion criteria to select relevant publications, and evaluating the quality of documents for further analysis. The execution phase, corresponding to Stages 4 and 5, involves constructing and analysing the research *corpus*. A *corpus*, as defined by Bauer e Aarts (2008), is a finite collection of materials selected for specific research purposes. While the original frameworks of Jesson, Matheson e Lacey (2011) and Kitchenham e Charters (2007) do not explicitly address *corpus* establishment in SLR, the guidelines from Bauer e Aarts (2008) were integrated into the methodological design of this review proposal. These guidelines emphasize the importance of representativeness, extensiveness, and relevance in *corpus* development. Selected documents, treated as raw data, undergo analytical information extraction to synthesize responses to address review questions. Stage 6 focuses on disseminating results, particularly the review's conclusion.

Drawing upon Gadamerian hermeneutic principles and the hermeneutic circles proposed by Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014), the epistemic framework employed in this SLR is characterized as non-linear, iterative, reflexive, and partially inductive. The circles of search and acquisition (CSA) and analysis and interpretation (CAI) are incorporated into the 6 stages of the SLR. Figure 2 visually depicts these circles, their

associated activities, and their interconnectedness. The iterative nature of the hermeneutic process is highlighted by dashed arrows, indicating the back-and-forth movements between CSA and CAI activities. According to Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014), an understanding of a document often necessitates multiple iterations within these circles. To facilitate this iterative process, the hermeneutic framework was modified to include the stages of the SLR within the logic of these circles.

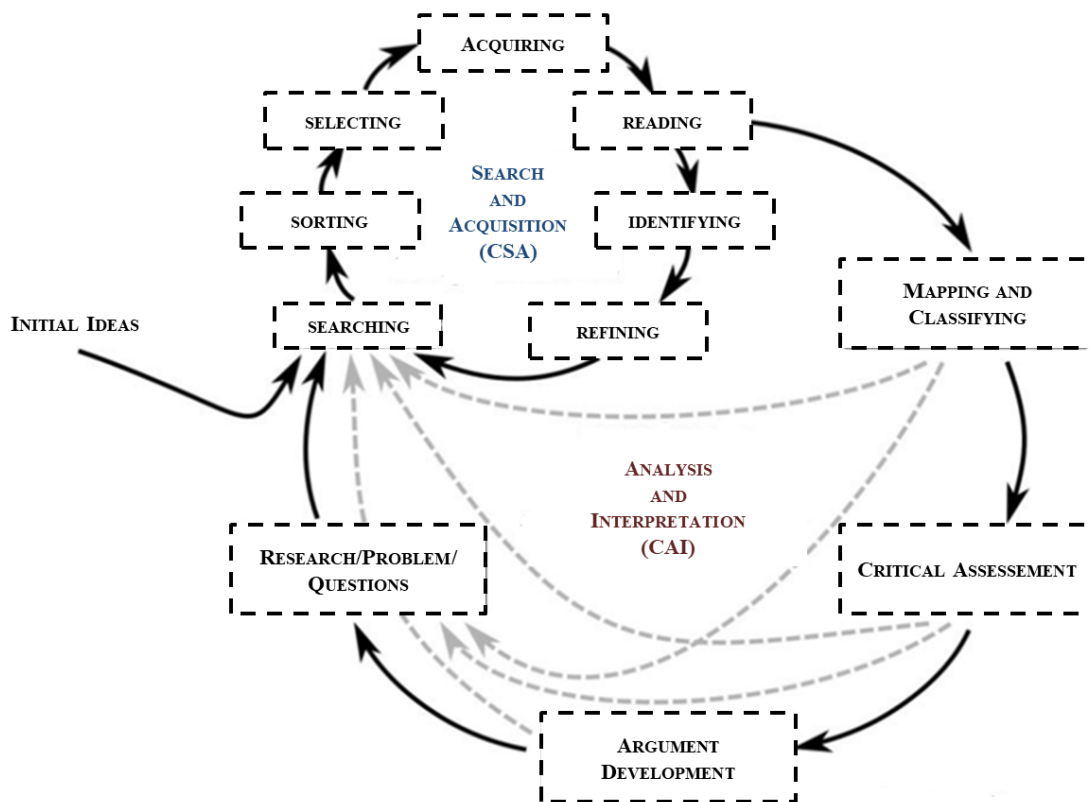
Figure 1 – Stages of a Systematic Review



Source: adapted from Kitchenham e Charters (2007) and Jesson, Matheson e Lacey (2011).

Stages 1 and 2 of the SLR occur within the circle of search and acquisition. They require a full cycle of CBA activities. Stage 1 starts with generating initial ideas, leading into the CSA. Subsequently, activities like search, sorting, selection, acquisition, reading, identification, and refinement of documents are conducted. The non-linear nature of the hermeneutic structure allows for shortcuts between CSA activities. Stage 1 activities serve to map the scope of the inquiry. Orienting reading in the CSA aids in understanding the contents of identified documents from this first stage. Following the recommendations of Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014), orienting reading aims to achieve initial and comprehensive understanding of the investigated phenomenon. This reading may uncover the need for further searches, facilitating subsequent iterations in the CSA and identifying overlooked documents. Stage 1 establishes the parameters of the SLR protocol. Information from analysed documents in this stage informs the formulation of research questions and search strings. The protocol, along with its parameters, guides Stage 2's progression.

Figure 2 – Hermeneutic Circles



Source: adapted from Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic (2014).



In the procedural and logical framework of the CSA, Stage 2 mirrors the activities of Stage 1, except for the initial ideation. However, Stage 2 differs from Stage 1 in four key aspects: the initiation point, objective, depth and analytical approach employed, and sequence of activity execution. Stage 2 begins with the search phase, where the strings developed in the previous stage are applied to designated research databases, such as: Scopus, Emerald, Springer Link, and Web of Science. Once a search is conducted, the results must be organized (i.e., sorting). One method is to use the ranking algorithm offered by a database, designed to present “more relevant” documents at the top of the list, while relegating “less relevant” ones towards the bottom. Subsequently, the circle proceeds with document extraction (i.e., acquiring). All collected documents undergo simultaneous reading and classification. During this stage, individual study categorization is determined by applying inclusion and exclusion criteria (i.e., selecting). Initially, these criteria are employed during the orienting reading of each study. Specific textual elements—such as title, abstract, introduction, and conclusion—facilitate the decision-making process regarding inclusion or exclusion. However, if evaluating these textual components proves insufficient for classification, a comprehensive reading of the entire document is necessary.

Similar to Stage 1, Stage 2 helps identify new studies, terms, concepts, sources, authors, and documents relevant to the phenomenon, refining search strategies. Reading enhances search methods, improving document identification. This stage includes search, acquisition, reading, classification, and selection processes. Further searches may be needed during the reading and refinement of documents. The research corpus construction is not a static process but rather evolves with each pertinent document encounter. Guided by specific criteria, Stage 2's classification process selects a small subset of documents for Stage 3 analysis, refining the initial search results. Stage 3 follows Stage 2, operating within the CBA framework. Unlike previous stages, Stage 3 does not demand a complete cycle of CBA activities. It starts with reading, involving classification and selection tasks. Selected studies undergo individual assessments against predefined quality criteria. Analytical reading aims to interpret and grasp study content comprehensively, facilitating a holistic understanding of each document, encompassing its focus, objectives, addressed research questions, adopted approach and methodology, utilized concepts and theories, presented evidence, significant knowledge claims, and contributions (Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Stage 3 results in a secondary set of relevant publications for Stage 4 analysis, forming the research corpus. It serves as the gateway to CAI, transitioning to deeper examination and synthesis of the selected documents.

Stages 4, 5, and 6 operate within CAI, whose non-linear logic allows shortcuts between its activities. The mapping and classification of studies in Stage 4 starts with the analytical reading of the final list of documents selected in Stage 3. During the fourth stage, documents are initially read individually, followed by a gradual comparison and contrast of their contents. The objective of this reading is to enhance comprehension of the documents within the research *corpus*. In Stage 4, reading is paired with the critical evaluation of documents. While analytical reading involves an examination of each

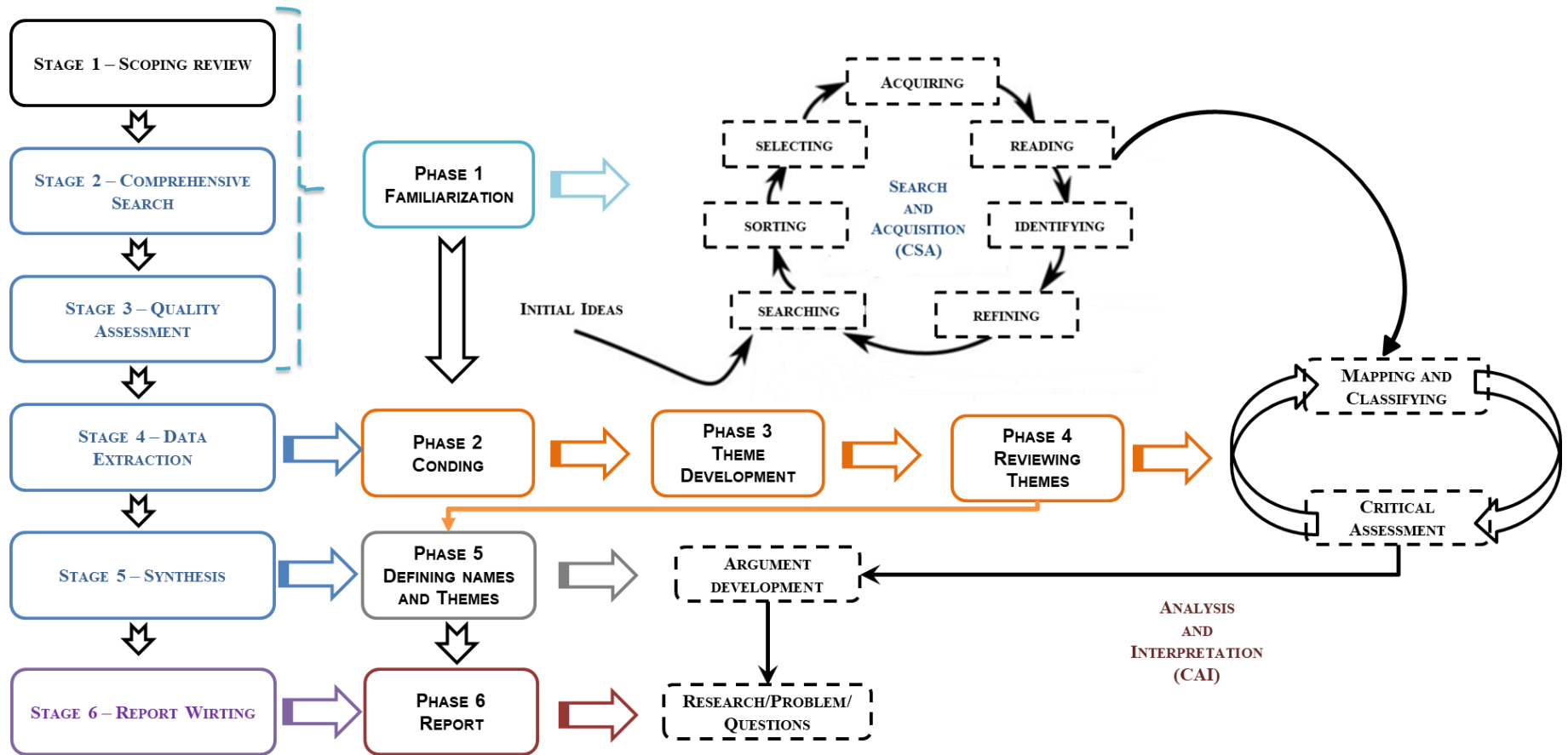


document and its relationships, critical evaluation activity scrutinizes the knowledge on the investigated phenomenon (Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Critical assessment aims to identify: a) gaps in the literature; b) neglect aspects about a phenomenon; c) inconsistencies and contradictions within and between documents; d) deficiencies in the knowledge regarding the research problem at hand (Alvesson e Sandberg, 2013). This activity uncovers underlying meanings within the documents' content and subjects it to critical assessment. It facilitates the emergence of fresh insights that hold the potential to expand the horizon of the current knowledge base, challenging established interpretations (Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014).

The researcher's *praejudicium* guides the mapping, classification, and critical evaluation activities, aiding in interpreting and even questioning established meanings in documents. These activities promote a fusion of horizons, fostering a dialogue between the researcher's horizon and that of the documents, expanding his intellectual horizons and fostering new insights into the research *corpus* (Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014). Stage 5 continues the critical evaluation initiated in Stage 4, involving synthesizing the documents' content within the SRL. This phase encourages comprehensive analysis of existing knowledge, acquisition and production processes, methodological efficacy, and inherent constraints within document arguments. The culmination of the critical evaluation, termed synthesis, is succeeded by the activity of developing arguments (Boell e Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2014), constituting Stage 6 within the CAI. This activity aims to encapsulate the researcher's reflections on the current state of knowledge related to the investigated phenomenon. It involves scrutinizing the validity of assumptions, arguments, and justifications in the documents to identify and address novel perspectives and gaps in the literature, addressing the SRL research problem.

The procedures of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) are applied within the CAI, particularly during the mapping, classification, and critical evaluation activities in Stages 4 and 5 of the RSL. Following the guidelines of Braun e Clarke (2006), Braun *et al.* (2017), and Clarke *et al.* (2019), the six-phase process of RTA are interactively, reflexively, and recursively. Similar to the circular nature of hermeneutic analysis, it is essential to move back and forth between these phases. Figure 3 illustrates how the guidelines and directives of RTA are integrated into the stages of RSL and the hermeneutic circle framework. The initial phase of RTA, termed familiarization, marks the beginning of analysing and interpreting document horizons. It unfolds entirely within the CBA, encompassing orientation reading in Stages 1 and 2, followed by analytical reading in Stage 3, as depicted in Figure 3. This phase culminates in immersive reading to extract insights, laying a strong foundation for interrogation and understanding document horizons. Its goal is not to impose formal labels but to explore inherent interests and to uncover potential connections related to the phenomenon. Drawing from Braun and Clarke (2019), three strategies are essential: repeated readings, note-taking of initial ideas, and identification of novel aspects, along with formulating broad questions about document intentionality. This phase explores and shapes initial meanings emerging from interactions between the researcher's and documents' horizons.

Figure 3 — Connection of SLR Stages with CSA and CAI Activities and ATR Phases



Source: the authors (2024).

The second phase of RTA, aligned with Stage 4 of the RSL, involves systematically assigning codes to significant segments within the research *corpus* documents. These segments, as individualized parts, are grouped based on similar meanings, aiding their organization into meaningful patterns later on. Following hermeneutic non-linear logic, coding is iterative, evolving during reading and analysis. Codes may change labels or meanings or be discarded as needed. This process is integrated into CAI activities, particularly in mapping and classification, and critical evaluation. In line with the configurative review's methodological design and hermeneutical approach, coding adopts a partially inductive method. Informed by hermeneutic principles, coding aligns with the researcher's horizon, including conceptual frameworks, pre-understandings, tradition and historical context, guiding the selection of significant document segments. Stage 4 suggests two coding processes, as per Terry *et al.* (2017): semantic (descriptive) and latent (interpretative). Semantic coding is an organic, provisional, open-ended, interactive, and adaptable labelling method requiring ongoing engagement with document content (Terry *et al.*, 2017). It captures explicit meanings from the significant segments of a text, offering surface-level interpretations<sup>3</sup> of the analysed documents (Braun *et al.*, 2019). Its purpose is descriptive, providing an overview of each segment content, reflecting their meanings, without establishing patterns and relationships among them within and across documents (Patterson e Williams, 2002). During CAI's mapping and classification, orienting reading supports semantic coding.

After completing semantic coding, latent coding of meaning units takes place. These units are a set of sentences that represent comprehensive and coherent ideas about aspects of the phenomenon, ranging from specific conceptions to broader stances with interconnected claims (Patterson e Williams, 2002). A claim is a statement intended to be either true or false. Aligned with configurative review and Gadamerian hermeneutics, these units convey the "truths" derived from the text's horizon on the phenomenon, aiding in assigning truth values to propositions. Latent coding delves into deeper, conceptual, implicit layers of meaning, capturing ideas or assumptions not explicitly stated in the document content. It primarily occurs during mapping and classification within CAI, facilitated by analytical reading. Following the coding of all meaning units, as recommended by Clarke *et al.* (2019), compile a list of codes to thoroughly identify the standardization and diversity of meanings within the units. Similar to significant segments, organize units by latent codes. Unlike segments, individual units from various documents can be grouped under thematic labels, concluding the second phase. The third phase, linked to Stage 4 of the RSL, encompasses constructing potential themes and subthemes based on the analysis of coded meaning units, as illustrated in Figure 3. Themes help identifying and develop patterns in document content, achieved by combining, grouping, or excluding codes to form potential themes.

Similarly to coding, theme construction is subjective and interpretative (Terry *et al.*, 2017). Themes remain flexible and subject to change (Braun *et al.*, 2019), often leading to new perspectives and interpretations of a phenomenon (Clarke *et al.*, 2019). This aligns with Gadamerian fusion of horizons, emphasizing researcher's horizon openness to novel insights from the text during the search for its meaning, whilst seeking its "truth". Reflexivity is evident in both coding and theme development, as themes emerge from extensive analytical efforts to establish standardized meanings across units (Braun e Clarke, 2012). Thematic labels clarify

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<sup>3</sup> This refers to the literal meaning extracted from documents' content (Braun *et al.*, 2019).

significant portions of the *corpus*, unifying diverse units of meaning found in various contexts, enabling meaningful pattern discernment.

In the third phase, as per the guidance of Terry *et al.* (2017), provisional thematic maps are created to illustrate potential themes and key organizing concepts shared across the codes. These maps clarify interconnections among themes and with the entire corpus, ensuring a coherent interpretation grounded in the identified themes/subthemes (Braun e Clarke, 2012). They help to avoid repetition, overlap, and inconsistency among candidate themes (Braun e Clarke, 2006). At this phase, a list of provisional themes is generated, outlining the central organizational pattern of the phenomenon's significant aspects and its various manifestations. Such phase, occurring in Stage 4 of the RSL within the CAI framework, is depicted in Figure 3.

The fourth phase implies reviewing and refining the provisional themes and subthemes, occurring during Stage 4 of the RSL within the CAI framework. This critical evaluation process guides the adjustment or even discarding of themes as needed (Braun *et al.*, 2019). Thematic maps are utilized to assist in organizing and refining the themes. Theme reviewing may confirm the suitability of candidate themes, offering a coherent narrative addressing the research question. However, adjustments may be necessary in other cases. Thematic maps aid in organizing and refining the themes, akin to their use in theme construction.

Theme review and definition, marking the fifth phase of the RTA, occurred in Stage 5 of the RSL. This phase initiates the synthesis process of the systematic review, enhancing interpretation from the critical evaluation activity in CAI. Such phase ensures candidate themes capture clearly, comprehensively, and concisely what is significant in the units of meaning (Braun *et al.*, 2017). Remaining themes are qualified as permanent. Theme definition aligns with hermeneutics interpretative approach, ensuring cohesion, precision, and quality of theme's scope and meaning. An analytical narrative, drawn from selected segments, constructs themes, reflected in a final thematic map. This narrative refers to the activity of developing arguments, taking place in CAI. Such narrative illustrates standardization and diversity of meanings within and between themes, reflecting researcher interpretation and synthesis stemmed from the fusion of horizons.

The reporting phase, the sixth in RTA, corresponds to Stage 6 of the RSL. It assesses the effectiveness of themes individually and collectively in relation to the units of meaning. The report narrates the overall story of the extracted data, drawing from documents, providing interpretations of themes that address research questions (Braun *et al.*, 2019). This phase also offers an interpretative synthesis of the *corpus*. It may also identify novel gaps in the literature, problems, or future research questions.

The epistemic proposition of integrating RTA phases with CAI activities facilitates the systematic application of Gadamerian principles, notably the hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons. RTA phases afford researchers to explore the part-whole relationship, revealing document horizons and confirming or challenging their own. This proposition merges the researcher's worldview, pre-existing assumptions, and theoretical perspectives into understanding document horizons over RTA phases. The "methodological" implementation of the hermeneutic circle and fusion of horizons for data analysis purposes adhere to the guidelines set forth by Patterson e Williams (2002) and Paterson e Higgs (2005). See Figure 4 for how these procedures are enacted in RSL stages and RTA phases.

Figure 4 illustrates two horizons in the hermeneutic circle: a) the interpreter's horizon — i.e., researcher's horizon, which includes his *praejudicium*, historical context, and scientific

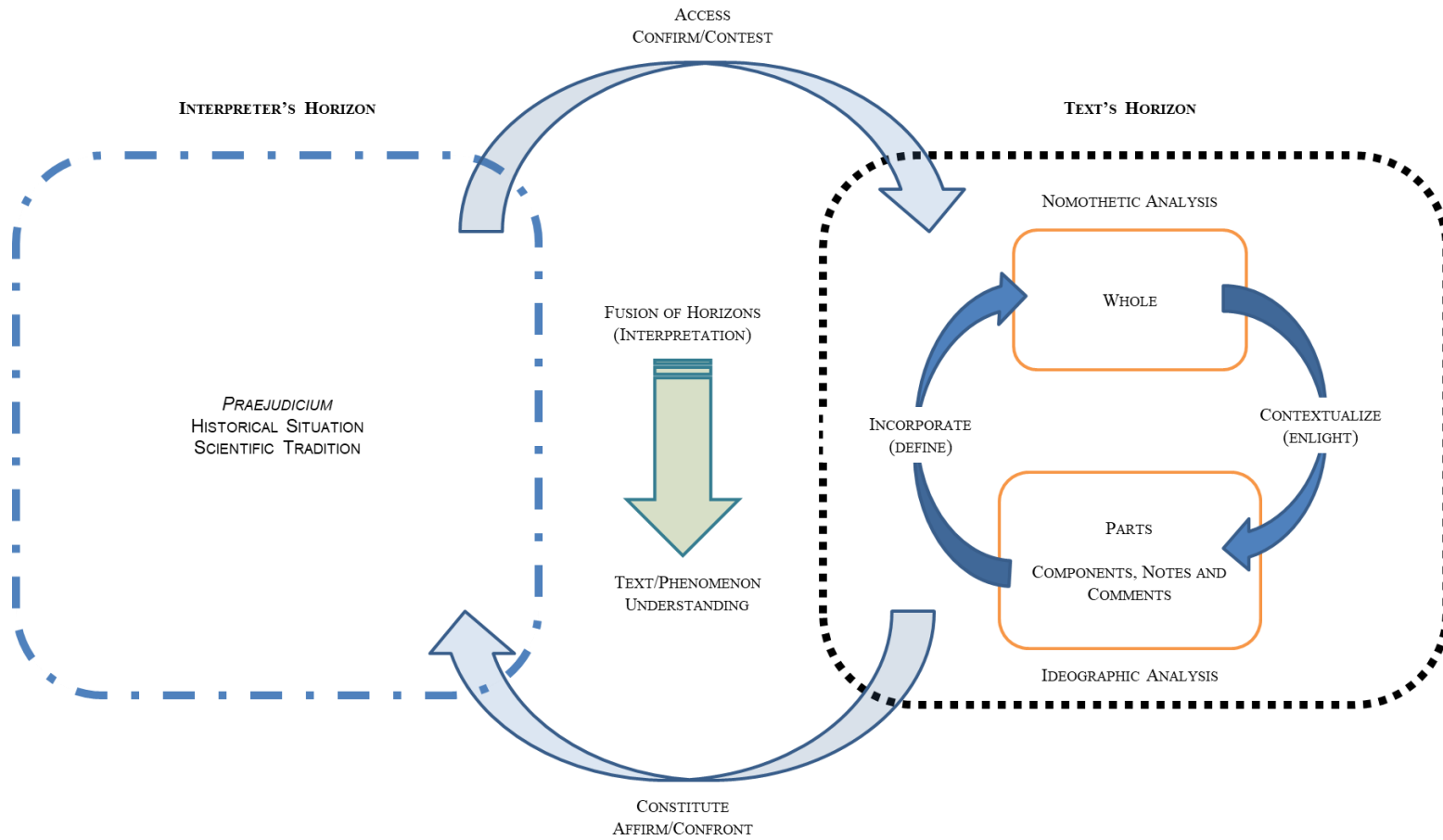


tradition; b) the text's horizon — i.e., representing its scientific tradition, historical context, and author's argument on the phenomenon. These horizons are depicted as boxes with dashed lines, indicating that their domains are not rigidly defined but rather open and adaptable. The fusion of horizons suggests that the researcher's horizon dialogues with and shapes the interpretation of the text's meaning. Implementing the hermeneutic method entails describing the facets of the researcher's *praejudicium*. This structure of understanding and conceptualization delineates his horizon, including preconceptions, prior assumptions, biases, theoretical inclinations, onto-epistemological preferences. The historical context, along with the researcher's *praejudicium*, initially constitute his historically situated consciousness on the phenomenon. Acknowledging the influence of his historical context prompts reflection on interpretations derived from the fusion of horizons in the RSL. Such structure guides the analysis and synthesis of the research *corpus*.

In the hermeneutic-interpretive tradition, the researcher's previous structure of understanding and conceptualization evolves through engagement with documents reviewed in Stages 1, 2, and 3 of the SRL, forming initial interpretations. This structure forms initial perspectives based on relevant literature, while staying open to unique aspects and emerging insights presented in the texts' epistemic horizon. Under the aegis of this structure, the researcher's horizon highlights certain issues while overlook others, mainly due to preconceptions, values and prejudices. This deepens the understanding of the texts' horizon, revealing how the documents portray the phenomenon. In hermeneutics, interpretation evolve as the text's horizon is viewed through the changing lens of the researcher's horizon. Considering hermeneutic circularity, this ongoing dialogue is facilitated by the part-whole relationship, shaping interpretations of the phenomenon. Self-reflection shapes the researcher's horizon during the research journey. Given the multitude of interpretations possible for a phenomenon, establishing a horizon serves as a pragmatic boundary to guide efforts in uncovering "a truth" based on the texts' understandings. Recognizing the inability to capture all of its facets highlights the situated and perspectival nature of knowledge. This acknowledgment prompts an awareness of limitations and qualifications in engaging with the document's horizon. These historically situated horizons delineate the realm of understanding in the RSL within the context of the phenomenon.

Gadamerian hermeneutical principles profoundly influence the researcher's understanding of reality and knowledge production, shaping prior assumptions regarding the phenomenon. Departing from objectivism, Gadamer asserts that comprehending reality and establishing truth occur through the fusion of horizons. This fusion begins as the researcher's horizon engages with the text during the reading activity, bringing forth the *praejudicium* about the phenomenon. This dialogue prompts questioning and envisions new interpretative possibilities for its arguments and assumptions. The researcher's interpretation is not a product of his solipsism; rather, the truth presented in the documents challenges and shapes his understanding through ongoing dialogue. While he seeks to impose his understanding onto the text's horizon, it maintains its own structure of understanding, resisting his determinations. Fully grasping the text's horizon without considering his own is unrealistic, as it prevents establishing his own truth. The purpose of the hermeneutic circle is not solely to ascertain the author's intentions but also to uncover "the truth" the text affirms within its horizon.

Figura 4 — Hermeneutic Circles and Fusion of Horizons Dynamics



Source: the authors (2024).



The hermeneutic circle involves a thorough exploration of the part-whole dynamic within the document's content, focusing on its horizon. The interplay of this relationship is depicted within the domain of such horizon. Understanding this horizon and the phenomenon is achieved through the part-whole analysis. In the proposed configurative review, two cyclical phases of this analysis are undertaken. The initial phase views each publication as a complete entity, with the phenomenon presented within each document as an individualized whole. Significant segments and units of meaning extracted from the document's content serve as constituent parts. In the subsequent phase, the research *corpus* encompasses the totality, housing the phenomenon of understanding absorbed as a whole. Each document represents a facet of the whole. The analysis unfolded cyclically between documents' constituent parts and the entire *corpus*, aiming for a comprehensive understanding. Units of meaning, extracted from individual documents or collectively from all, delineate the whole which provides a contextual backdrop for each component. The analytical procedure entails scrutinizing the individual components before reintegrating them into the whole.

Following Patterson e Williams (2002) recommendations, the rationale for the part-whole relationship align with ideographic and nomothetic analyses. Ideographic analysis dissects parts, operating at the individual level. Nomothetic analysis examines the whole. It is an aggregated level analysis. The latter broadens the ideographic approach by incorporating multiple individuals' viewpoints to construct a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon. In procedural terms, the part-whole analysis initially focuses on understanding individual parts, regardless of discernible patterns. Subsequently, nomothetic analysis identifies overarching patterns — or themes — among the parts, conducted after the ideographic-level analysis. Due to the part-whole cyclical dynamic, the synthesized understanding from the nomothetic analysis forms the basis deeper examination of individual parts. Following this, nomothetic analysis identifies overarching patterns or themes among the parts, conducted after the ideographic-level analysis. The synthesized meaning of the parts, viewed as discrete data, alters the totality of interpreter's initial understanding, thus impacting the interpretation of the parts once more. Ultimately, the aim is to achieve a nomothetic understanding of the phenomenon, encompassing, yet extending beyond, the ideographic comprehension of individual parts.

The procedural logic of part-whole analysis is fundamental to Reflexive Thematic Analysis, guiding all its stages. In this SRL, the analytical reading is performed with the hermeneutic rationale, considering both ideographic and nomothetic levels of analysis. Individual reading and interpretation of documents reveal "the truths" about the studied phenomenon within each study. Critical evaluation assists in interpreting documents by applying both ideographic and nomothetic analyses within the hermeneutic circle's part-whole relationship. In the hermeneutic approach, these units are best comprehended when situated within their contexts. Understanding a text from its constituent parts necessitates recognizing their interrelations and integration with the whole. Reading enables access to the inherent truths within and across individual documents, establishing connections between them. This process illuminates their significance within a broader context, aiding in the identification of each study's contribution and the construction of a holistic interpretation of the phenomenon.



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