

# Reviewing the Literature in Social and Educational Research

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*Is reviewing the literature  
important, or just a necessary  
chore?*

It's among the most important  
parts of the research process.

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# What is a literature review?

- What functions do reviews serve?
- What forms can they take?
- What form *should* they take?

You may be surprised to hear that there has been quite a lot of controversy about these matters.

Reviews may:

1. vary in who carries them out, and under what auspices;
2. have a wide focus on a whole field, or be concerned with a single, quite specific question.
3. be intended to stand alone or be designed to prepare the way for a new investigation;
4. vary in who is the main target audience: fellow researchers or a lay audience of some kind.
5. differ according to whether the framework for the review comes from within or outside the reviewed research field;
6. seek to aggregate the data from multiple studies, or to identify and assess key exemplars of particular approaches;
7. aim to summarise the current state of knowledge in a field, and/or to consider what inferences might be drawn about policies or practices from work in a particular area.

# Types of research literature review

- Annotated bibliographies
- Reviews of the relevant literature forming part of articles, books, and theses or dissertations.
- Stand-alone reviews of relevant literature aimed at an academic audience: 'narrative', 'traditional', 'qualitative'
- Stand-alone reviews of relevant literature aimed at some lay audience: 'systematic', 'integrative', 'realist', or 'configurative'

These have very different requirements.

# Controversy

Attacks on 'traditional reviews' by advocates of 'systematic' review. For example:

'most literature reviews in social science are selective, opinionated and discursive rampages through the literature which the reviewer happens to know about or can easily lay his or her hands on.'

(Oakley 2007:96)

# Specific criticisms

- Failure to carry out *exhaustive* surveys of relevant literature
- Lack of *consistent criteria* for selecting what is to be included in the review.
- Absence of any systematic procedure for *synthesising* the findings of the studies.
- *Insufficient information* provided for readers about how the review was carried out (lack of 'transparency').

# Synthesis and Qualitative Research

One response to the notion of ‘systematic review’ on the part of qualitative researchers has been the development of various strategies of qualitative synthesis, including for example ‘meta-ethnography’ (Noblit and Hare 1988).

The aim here, sometimes, has been to satisfy the main requirements of a systematic review (exhaustive search, explicit assessment criteria, etc), in ways that remain true to the principles of qualitative research, in particular aiming at *theoretical* synthesis rather than *aggregation* of findings (see Hammersley 2013:ch11).



Do 'systematic review' and qualitative synthesis produce literature reviews, or are they forms of secondary analysis?

It has been argued that they are forms of research in their own right.

However, most literature reviews involve some kind of synthesis, which means that we can learn something from these recent developments.

# The interpretive critique

Traditional reviews have also been attacked for being in conflict with the basic presuppositions of qualitative inquiry, because they:

- Assume a linear model of the cumulative development of knowledge, in which each study adds a new 'brick to the wall';
- Assume that research studies can be objectively assessed in terms of their methodological adequacy and/or their representational veracity, *and assume that these are the most important criteria of assessment.* (see Hammersley 2013:ch10)

# Key Decisions:

1. What is the purpose of the review, and who is its main audience?
2. How are the boundaries of what would be relevant studies to be defined?
3. How are such studies to be searched for?
4. How are relevant studies to be selected, and which are to be included in the review?
5. How are the studies and their findings to be evaluated?
7. How is the review to be structured?

(see Hart 1998)

# Functions the existing literature can serve in research

- It constitutes the context for the formulation and development of research questions.
- It will usually offer possible answers to those questions, and indicate what might count as adequate answers.
- It may suggest useful theoretical ideas and methods, though it is not the only source.
- It will provide resources that can be relied upon in developing arguments and evidence in support of answers to research questions.

# Literature and Data

- The distinction between research literature and data primarily concerns how each is used
- Data are used to draw inferences about the phenomena that the researcher is concerned to understand.
- Research literature supplies much of the knowledge on which these inferences rely.
- However, the distinction can sometimes be fuzzy. For instance, literature produced by policymakers or practitioners can sometimes serve both purposes.

# Reviewing the literature is a process

- It must begin at the start, but will need to develop over the course of inquiry, in light of changes in research questions, in one's understanding of the field, and according to judgments about what would be most useful and effective in pursuing the research.
- It is not solely concerned with producing a literature review chapter: the literature will need to be used in other parts of any thesis or book.

# Mapping relevant literatures

- What are to be reviewed are research studies, and the aim is to assess the current state of knowledge and methodological strategies.
- In the early stages of research the task of searching for and reading relevant literature is primarily a matter of identifying what *could* be relevant, what significance it may have, and how it might be used.
- There will be core literature that is very likely to be relevant, but also many other areas of literature, fairly indeterminate in their boundaries, that could be relevant.

# Primary and secondary literature

- It is worth looking out for existing reviews of the literature, of whatever type, that are relevant to your area of research
- You may also find useful discussions in textbooks.
- However, caution is required in using these secondary sources: they are not always entirely accurate.
- Where the material relates to a core area of the investigation it will be necessary to go to the primary sources



# Types of searching

- Looking in catalogues, on library shelves, or in academic bookshops for relevant literature.
- Searching via electronic databases.
- Looking through or searching relevant journals, especially for review articles.
- *Following up references in sources already found.*

There is a tension between exhaustiveness and pragmatism.

# Types of reading

- Skim reading
- Reading in search of specific kinds of information.
- Close or in-depth reading designed to understand and to assess the arguments and evidence put forward, and how these relate to the field of investigation (see, for example, Hammersley 1997).

Different reading strategies will be needed, at particular times, in dealing with particular articles and books, depending on the purpose they are serving. May need to re-read.

# Reading and understanding

There are at least three tasks involved in this reading.

1. Understanding the texts themselves and the research they report
2. Engaging in appropriate assessment of these; and
3. Understanding the relevance of what one is reading for one's own work.

What is involved here is an emerging hermeneutic process.

# Note-taking

- This will vary depending upon the nature of the reading. Notes from skim reading will be very different from those produced by more detailed reading, with the latter requiring accurate quotations with page references.
- Remember that your future self will need to be able to understand the notes, at the very least to use them to find relevant material in the sources.

# Writing a literature review chapter

- The purpose of a literature review chapter: to provide a context and rationale for the study.
- Avoid sequential paragraphs summarising each study: some degree of synthesis is needed. But annotated reviews can be useful for your own purposes in doing your research.
- It is also important to evaluate the studies in methodological terms. Take care not to do this in a tendentious fashion: in other words, criticising those that don't serve your purposes, while not critically assessing those whose findings you find congenial or useful.

# Using the literature in other parts of a thesis, dissertation, or book

- In an introduction
- In a methodology chapter
- In analysis chapters
- In the Conclusion

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