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The Literature Review Chapter

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

By the end of this chapter, you will be able to:

- Understand what a literature review should contain.
- Know the principles underlying a good literature review.
- Think about when is the most appropriate time to write a literature chapter.
- Consider the alternatives to having such a chapter.

21.1 INTRODUCTION

There are four common misconceptions of the literature review chapter:

- It is done just to display that ‘you know the area’.
- It is easier to do than your data analysis chapters.
- It is boring to read (and to write).
- It is best ‘got out of the way’ at the start of your research.

Later in this chapter, all these assertions will be questioned. By contrast I will argue that a literature review:

- should combine knowledge with critical thought
- involves hard work but can be exciting to read
- should mainly be written *after* you have completed your data analysis.

I will begin, however, by trying to answer some practical questions about writing a literature review: What should it contain? Where will you find what you need to read? How should you read?

TABLE 21.1 CONTENTS OF A LITERATURE REVIEW

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- What do we already know about the topic?
 - What do you have to say critically about what is already known?
 - Has anyone else ever done anything exactly the same?
 - Has anyone else done anything that is related?
 - Where does your work fit in with what has gone before?
 - Why is your research worth doing in the light of what has already been done?
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Source: adapted from Murcott (1997)

21.2 PRACTICAL QUESTIONS

21.2.1 *What should a literature review contain?*

In part, a literature review should be used to display your scholarly skills and credentials. In this sense, you should use it:

To demonstrate skills in library searching; to show command of the subject area and understanding of the problem; to justify the research topic, design and methodology. (Hart, 1998: 13)

Such justification also means, as I remarked in Chapter 6, that any literature review connected with a piece of research has as much to do with the issue of **generalizability** as with displaying your academic credentials. This involves addressing the questions set out in Table 21.1.

Once you start to see your literature review as dialogic rather than a mere replication of other people's writing, you are going in the right direction. Conceived as an answer to a set of questions, your reading can immediately become more directed and your writing more engaging and relevant.

21.2.2 *Preparing a literature search*

As Hart (2001: 24) points out, it helps to do some preliminary thinking about what you are doing before you begin the search itself. Below are some issues to think about (drawn from Hart, 2001: 24):

- What discipline(s) relate to my main topic?
- How can I focus my topic to make my search more precise?
- What are the main indexes and abstracts relevant to my topic?
- What means of recording will be most efficient for many tasks such as cross-referencing? (Hart points out that index cards are useful.)

PART FIVE ● WRITING UP**21.2.3 Where will I find the literature?**

Once you are prepared, it is time to review the many potential sources of information about what literature you need to read and where to find it:

- your supervisor
- the subject librarian in your university library
- bibliographies in the literature you read
- online searches on the World Wide Web
- the social sciences citation index
- newsgroups on the Internet
- your fellow students (past and present).

There is no need to worry about admitting your lack of knowledge. Indeed the American sociologist Gary Marx recommends taking 'short cuts': 'learn how to use computer searches, encyclopedias, review articles. Ask experts for help' (1997: 106).

Once you start looking, you will speedily find that you do not have a problem with too little literature but of too much!. Getting away from the books and towards your data is a leap that most of us need to make as early as possible. As Marx cautions: 'Don't become a bibliophile unless it suits you' (1997: 106).

21.2.4 There's so much; how will I find the time?

Before you panic, you need to remember that you would not have reached this stage of your academic career without learning the tricks of the reading trade. These tricks go beyond the skills of speed reading (although these help) but also mean that your aim is usually to 'fillet' a publication in terms of your own agenda (not the author's!).

Again, Marx makes the point well:

Sample! Learn how to read by skimming, attending to the first and last sentence, paragraph or chapter. Read conclusions first, then decide if you want the rest. Most social science books probably shouldn't be books; they have only a few main (or at least original) ideas. (1997: 106)

If these are some answers to the usual 'nuts and bolts' questions, we still need to tackle the underlying principles behind a literature review. As my earlier discussion of 'misconceptions' suggested, these principles are not always obvious or clear cut.

21.3 PRINCIPLES

This is how the best recent book on the topic defines a literature review:

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The selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic, which contain information, ideas, data and evidence written from a particular standpoint to fulfil certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated, and the effective evaluation of these documents in relation to the research being proposed. (Hart, 1998: 13)

Hart's term 'effective evaluation' means, I believe, attending to the following principles.

21.3.1 Show respect for the literature

Your single-minded pursuit of your (ideally) narrow research topic should not lead you to show disrespect for earlier research or to disconnect your work from the wider debate in which it figures. Your dissertation will be assessed in terms of its scholarship and being 'scholarly' means showing 'respect' as well as striking out on your own. In Marx's words:

Even producers of literature must know the literature, and a major criterion for evaluating work is whether or not it is put in a context of prior scholarship. We are not only creators of new knowledge, but protectors and transmitters of old knowledge. Our inheritance is the astounding richness of the work of prior scholars. Beyond that, one has a strategic interest in the peer reciprocity inherent in the citing system. (1997: 106)

21.3.2 Be focused and critical

Respect can only get you so far. Scholarship also means advancing knowledge – although the level of that advance required will vary according to the degree at which you are aiming. Such advance involves a strict focus and a critical perspective on what you read:

After some initial grovelling, know what you are looking for. Approach the literature with questions and remember that your goal is to advance it, not simply to marvel at its wonders. Seek an appropriate balance between appreciation and advancement of the literature. (Marx, 1997: 106)

21.3.3 Avoid mere description

Any academic has horror stories of literature reviews which were tediously and irrelevantly descriptive. Rudestam and Newton characterize well such failing reviews:

[they consist of] a laundry list of previous studies, with sentences or paragraphs beginning with the words, "Smith found ...", "Jones concluded ...", "Anderson stated...", and so on. (1992: 46)

PART FIVE ● WRITING UP

In this vein, Marx recommends avoiding writing ‘a literature summary without an incisive critique that will help your peers to view the world differently’ (1997: 106). Instead, you need to focus on those studies that are relevant for defining *your* research problem. By the end of the literature review:

the reader should be able to conclude that, “Yes, of course, this is the exact study that needs to be done at this time to move knowledge in this field a little further along.” (Rudestam and Newton, 1992: 47)

This entails giving different amounts of attention to what you read according to how central they are to your topic. Background literature can just be described in a sentence. By contrast, the most relevant studies ‘need to be critiqued rather than reported’ (1992: 49). Such critique can focus on failings of theory or method (see Chapter 15).

21.3.4 Write up after your other chapters

The common version of a student research trajectory suggests that a major early aim is to complete a literature review. This version is supported in the ‘Time Checklist’ provided by British Research Councils for PhD students. This includes the following recommendation: ‘First year ... student to complete a literature survey’ (British Research Councils, 1996). Elsewhere the same publication gives less dogmatic advice:

In some subjects a *literature survey* forms an important starting portion of the work, and this should be carried out in the early stages. Before the end of the first year, the student should have a good idea of relevant work carried out by others, but it will be necessary to keep up with new literature throughout the period, so that the thesis takes account of the latest developments in its subject area.

This more considered advice hints at the problems of completing your literature review at an early stage. These problems may include:

- Completing the literature survey in year 1 and writing it up can mean a lot of wasted effort – until you have done your data analysis, you do not know what stuff will be relevant.
- You may be tempted to regard the literature review as a relatively easy task. Since it tests skills you have already learned in your undergraduate career, it may become potential ‘busy work’. If so, it only will delay getting down to the data analysis on which you should be judged.
- As I asked in Chapter 6, can you ever get out of the library in order to write your thesis? One book will surely have a list of further ‘crucial’ references and so on, *ad infinitum*. Anybody who thinks a library PhD is a ‘quick fix’ would be well advised to ponder whether they have the will-power to stop reading.

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These considerations mean that the bulk of your reading is usually best done in and around your data collection and analysis. In the end, this will save you the time involved in drafting your literature review chapter before you can know which literature will be most relevant to your treatment of your topic. It will also force you out of the library. As Marx comments: 'searching the literature must not become an end in itself or a convenient way to avoid the blank page' (1997: 106).

So: read as you do the analyses. By all means write notes on your reading but don't attempt to write your literature review chapter early on in your research.

However, as researchers, we should be critical and innovative. In this regard, how far is the literature review chapter simply an unthought relic of an out-of-date version of scholarship? Do you need such a chapter?

21.4 DO YOU NEED A LITERATURE REVIEW CHAPTER?

The major unorthodox figure here is the American ethnographer Harry Wolcott. He argues that student researchers often mistakenly assume a need to defend qualitative research in general as well as the particular approach or method they are using. But, as he suggests after a century of qualitative research (and several decades of more specific qualitative approaches):

There is no longer a call for each researcher to discover and defend [qualitative methods] anew, nor a need to provide an exhaustive review of the literature about such standard procedures as participant observation or interviewing. Instead of having to describe and defend qualitative approaches, as we once felt obligated to do, it is often difficult to say anything new or startling about them. Neophyte researchers who only recently have experienced these approaches first-hand need to recognize that their audiences probably do not share a comparable sense of excitement about hearing them described once again. (1990: 26)

Wolcott also points to some positive gains of avoiding the statutory review chapter. As he puts it:

I expect my students to know the relevant literature, but I do not want them to lump (dump?) it all into a chapter that remains unconnected to the rest of the study. I want them to draw upon the literature selectively and appropriately as needed in the telling of their story. (1990: 17)

This means that you can bring in appropriate literature as you need it, not in a separate chapter but in the course of your data analysis:

Ordinarily this calls for introducing related research toward the end of a study rather than at the beginning, except for the necessary "nesting" of the problem in the introduction. (1990: 17)

PART FIVE ● WRITING UP

Wolcott's radical suggestion is, no doubt, too radical for most students (and their supervisors!). Nevertheless, even if you decide to write the conventional literature review chapter, what he has to say is a salutary reminder that, in writing a research dissertation, you should cite other literature only in order to connect your narrow research topic to the directly relevant concerns of the broader research community. Making wider links should properly be left to your final chapter (see Chapter 24).

21.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this chapter, I have argued that a literature review should combine knowledge with critical thought. It should involve hard work but be exciting to read and should mainly be written *after* you have completed your data analysis.

KEY POINTS

A literature review should contain answers to the following questions:

- What do we already know about the topic?
- What do you have to say critically about what is already known?
- Has anyone else ever done anything exactly the same?
- Has anyone else done anything that is related?
- Where does your work fit in with what has gone before?
- Why is your research worth doing in the light of what has already been done?

Further reading

The essential book on this topic is Chris Hart's *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Imagination* (Sage, 1998). This covers in detail all the issues discussed in this brief chapter as well as addressing the different requirements of literature reviews for BA, MA and PhD dissertations. Hart's later book, *Doing a Literature Search* (Sage, 2001), is a helpful guide to planning and executing a literature search. For shorter, lively discussions see Harry Wolcott's *Writing Up Qualitative Research* (Sage, 1990) and Gary Marx's paper, 'Of methods and manners for aspiring sociologists: 37 moral imperatives' (*The American Sociologist*, Spring 1997, 102–25).

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Exercise 21.1

Select what you regard as the two or three most relevant pieces of literature. Now:

- 1 Make notes on each, attempting to use each one to answer the questions found in Table 21.1.
- 2 Incorporate these notes in a short literature review chapter which only refers to these two or three works.
- 3 Discuss this review with your supervisor.

Exercise 21.1

When you complete each data-analysis chapter, look back over the literature you have discussed. Now ask yourself these questions:

- 1 Is there sufficient discussion of each reference to render further discussion (in a literature review chapter) redundant?
- 2 If not, practise writing about these references in a way that adds to how you have described them in your data-analysis chapters. Again, you may use Table 21.1 as a guide.