

Lecture IV: Reviewing the Literature

A literature review is a compilation, classification, and evaluation of what other researchers have written on a particular topic. A literature review normally forms part of a research dissertation /thesis but it can also stand alone as a self-contained review of writings on a subject.

In either case, the primary purpose of a literature review is to assist readers in understanding the whole body of available research on a topic, informing readers on the strengths and weaknesses of studies within that body (De Los Reyes & Kazdin, 2008). Its purpose is to:

First, by undertaking a literature review, the information gathered from credible articles or studies that are of relevance, important and valid can be summarized into a document (for example, a thesis or a dissertation). This can then allow for the rationale or reason for a study to emerge, which may include a justification for a specific research approach (McGhee et al, 2007).

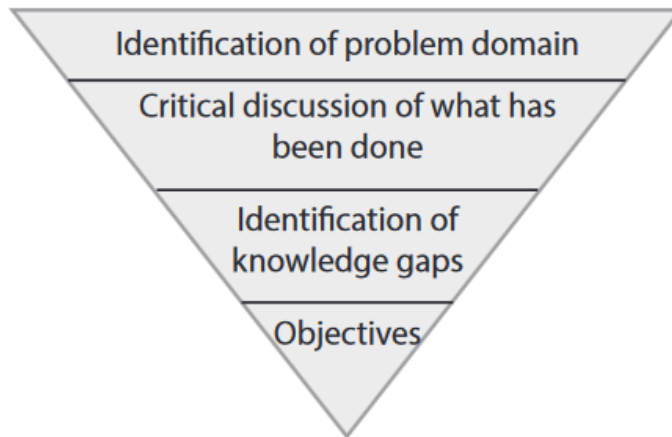
Second, it provides a starting point for researchers where they are required to identify and understand what has been written about a particular area. That will usually mean reading all the relevant texts and then going through each to summarize, evaluate, critically review, synthesize and compare these research studies in their chosen area.

„ Third, by carrying out a literature review, it not only highlights the gaps in knowledge but it means that students, researchers and managers alike are not replicating or repeating previous work - it identifies discrepancies, knowledge gaps and inconsistencies in the literature.

Lastly, it can support “clarity in thinking about concepts and possible theory development” (Henwood and Pidgeon, 2006)

The purpose of a literature review is to follow a process as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The purpose of the literature review.



➤ *Types of Research Literature*

Primary Literature Primary sources means original studies, based on direct observation, use of statistical records, interviews, or experimental methods, of actual practices or the actual impact of practices or policies.

Original research results in journals, dissertations, and conference proceedings.

Secondary Literature Secondary literature consists of interpretations and evaluations that are derived from or refer to the primary source literature.

Journal articles that comment on or analyze research.

Tertiary Literature Tertiary literature consists of a distillation and collection of primary and secondary sources such as textbooks, encyclopedia, and guidebooks or handbooks.

➤ *Types of Literature Reviews*

In general, six basic types of literature review.

Argumentative Review This form examines literature selectively in order to support or refute an argument, deeply embedded assumption, or philosophical problem already established in the literature. The purpose is to develop a body of literature that establishes a contrarian viewpoint.

Integrative Review Considered a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated. The body of literature includes all studies that address related or identical hypotheses.

Historical Review Few things rest in isolation from historical precedent. Historical reviews are focused on examining research throughout a period of time; often starting with the first time an issue, concept, theory, phenomenon emerged in the literature, then tracing its evolution within the scholarship of a discipline.

Methodological Review A review does not always focus on **what** someone said [content], but **how** they said it [method of analysis]. This type provides a framework of understanding at different levels (i.e. those of theory, substantive fields, research approaches, and data collection and analysis techniques), enables researchers to draw on a wide variety of knowledge ranging from the conceptual level to practical documents for use in fieldwork in the areas of ontological and epistemological consideration, quantitative and qualitative integration, sampling, interviewing, data collection and data analysis, and helps highlight many ethical issues which we should be aware of and consider as we go through our study.

Systematic Review This form consists of an overview of existing evidence pertinent to a clearly formulated research question, which uses pre-specified and standardized methods to identify and critically appraise relevant research, and to collect, report, and analyze data from the studies that are included in the review. Typically it focuses on a very specific empirical question, often posed in a cause-and-effect form, such as "To what extent does A contribute to B?"

Theoretical Review The purpose of this form is to concretely examine the corpus of theory that has accumulated in regard to an issue, concept, theory, and phenomenon. The theoretical literature review help establish what theories already exist, the relationships between them, to what degree the existing theories have been investigated, and to develop new hypotheses to be tested.

➤ *The Structure of the Literature Review*

In writing a literature review you need to demonstrate your intellectual ability to recognize relevant information and to synthesize and evaluate it according to the tentative guiding research question/thesis statement you have developed. Your reader wants to know: a) what literature exists, but also b) your informed evaluation of the literature. While reviewing the literature, you need to be answering questions such as:

1. What are the main ideas and contributions that form the core of the literature?
2. Which papers are important and which ones are not?
3. Have there been controversies and how have they been resolved?

4. What are the common assumptions made in the papers you are reviewing?
5. What are the current deficiencies/mistakes and unresolved issues as you see them?
6. Are there important connections to other topics?
7. Has the emphasis been more empirical or theoretical? Why?

In your literature review you should:

- Group research studies and other relevant literature according to a common theme
- Summarize each item of the literature appropriately according to its significance
- Compare and evaluate each item of the literature
- Provide topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs and summary sentences at the end of sections to help the reader understand what the main issues are.

Remember that your literature review is a highly considered list and that you make reference to published literature only where necessary. Therefore, your objective in writing a literature review is NOT to list as many articles and names as possible; or try to refer to every piece of literature in the area (this is not possible anyway).

Remember that, when writing the literature review, you need to demonstrate that you can scan the literature efficiently and appraise information critically. It is, therefore, a bad sign when every paragraph begins with the names of the researchers: “Smith (1992) said...”, “Jones (1995) claims...” etc.

A good literature review:

- Clearly delimits the subject matter to be reviewed
- Covers all important relevant literature
- Is up-to-date
- Provides an insightful analysis of the ideas and conclusions in the literature
- Points out similarities and differences, strengths and weaknesses in the literature
- Identifies gaps in the literature for future research identifies the context for which the literature is important.