

# The Critical Literature Review

## Q: What is a literature review?

Stated most simply, it is an overview of published and unpublished materials which help answer two fundamental questions:

1. What are the current theoretical or policy issues and debates related to your topic?
2. What is the current state of knowledge about these issues and problems?

## Q: Why do a review of the literature?

### 1. As a way to frame and focus a research project

- When research questions are formed without sustained reference to the literature, the study is likely to be marred by
  1. Naïve research instruments that lack conceptual underpinnings
  2. Problems with sense-making because the researcher is not alert to themes that may be identifiable
  3. Problems with claims-making because the researcher lacks the knowledge to state its significance for theory, policy or practice.
- Knowledge of the literature can help:
  1. Tighten research questions
  2. Enhance conceptual sensitivity
  3. Provide a source for making comparisons
  4. Provide a cache of descriptive data
  5. Provide questions for initial observations and interviews
  6. Stimulate questions during the analysis
  7. Suggest areas for theoretical sampling
  8. Confirm findings, or, findings can be used to show where current literature is incorrect, simplistic, or partial
  9. Model ways of making claims about the possible significance of your work

### 2. As a way to justify a research project to stakeholders

- Although ideas for the research topic can come from anywhere (including biography or personal interest), the *purpose* and *significance* of the research and its relevance are generally established through showing its place in what is already known about the subject.
- Particularly if you are writing a proposal, the way you justify the purpose and significance of your research project to funding sources, committees, and other gatekeepers is by critically reviewing the published literature on your topic and showing how the proposed research will contribute to the conversation.

## Types of Literature and Types of Literature Reviews

- In general, the literature can be divided into four substantive categories:
  1. Topical literature relevant to the subject matter of the research
  2. Theoretical literature relevant to concepts and theoretical frameworks

3. Methodological literature relevant to strategies of data collection and analysis
  4. Policy literature relevant to the implementation and effectiveness of interventions
- Although these categories of literature are potentially relevant to any research subject, the goals and purposes of the research should determine which are useful to any particular research project.
  - Although the theoretical and methodological literature can generally be found in published books and articles, the topical and policy literature is scattered more widely in the so-called “gray literature” which can include foundation reports, conference proceedings, dissertations, magazines, etc., as well as in government reports and statistical sources. Naturally, these sources require much greater effort to uncover and are harder to review in a systematic way.
  - Not all literature reviews are the same or conducted for the same purpose. Table 2.1 in Petticrew & Roberts contains a useful overview. The scope and types of literature discussed and the way they are reviewed (summarized or presented more critically, for example) depends upon the intended use of the review.

In the context of field studies, remember that an overreliance on the literature can stifle creativity and may produce an overly deductive approach.

<b>Let the literature guide you, not rule you.</b>
--

### **Tips on doing a critical literature review**

#### Finding usable literature:

- Browse discipline-specific or area-specific reviews (*Annual Review of Sociology*, etc.)
- Look through past several years of flagship journals
- Use key terms to search electronic databases
- Limit yourself to 10 or so items to actually review (varies by project of course), only about half of which you will actually read properly.

#### Reviewing the literature:

- Don't just summarize the studies, *evaluate* them (but don't be too dismissive)
- Look for *key themes* and *issues* running through them
- Take a *holistic view* of the relevant literature to provide an *overview* of what it says
- Pay attention to the utility of qualitative research methods to address key themes and issues

**Remember, the literature review is part of the research process. Like data collection and analysis, it should be systematic and thorough.**