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The nature and purpose of a literature review

Summary • Learning outcomes • The nature of a literature review • Identifying the main subject and themes • Reviewing previous research • Emphasizing leading research studies • Exploring trends in the literature • Summarizing key ideas in a subject area • Key terms • Key questions • Key reading

Summary

A literature review is usually regarded as being an essential part of student projects, research studies and dissertations. This chapter examines the reasons for the importance of the literature review, and the things which it tries to achieve. It also explores the main strategies which you can use to write a good literature review.

Learning outcomes

After reading this chapter you should be able to do the following:

- Understand the nature of a literature review.
- Summarize the reasons why a literature review is regarded as being so important in projects and dissertations.

- List and understand the main ways in which you can go about reviewing a body of literature.

The nature of a literature review

Just about every student has at one time or another had to write a literature review! However, despite the fact that it is almost obligatory in research studies and dissertations, there is often not the time on busy courses for tutors to devote all the time to it that the subject deserves. The aim of this book is therefore to address this problem, and to look systematically at the reasons for writing a literature review, and how to go about doing it. Generally speaking, the longer the piece of work you are doing, then the more crucial becomes the review of literature. You will need to find and write about more examples of previous research, and the overall job becomes quite a major undertaking. This book will provide you with a step-by-step logical approach to the process, which should make it both easier and more interesting.

What then is a literature review? Well, when you are researching a topic, it usually has to be fairly narrow and focused, and because of this it can be difficult to appreciate how your research subject is connected to other related areas. The overall purpose of a literature review is to demonstrate this, and to help the reader to understand how your study fits into a broader context. For example, you might be carrying out an interview study of a small group of young people, to explore the difficulties they have in becoming established in a career. They will probably talk about a wide range of issues, many of which are personal or specific to them. However, when you come to write up your data as a dissertation, you will inevitably want to draw broader conclusions, and to apply your data to other related situations. You will also want to demonstrate that the question of finding a job or career for young people does not depend solely upon the young person themselves. There are wider factors in society which can affect their success or failure.

This is where the literature review becomes important. Whether or not a young person can find a suitable career definitely depends partly on the qualities and aptitudes of the individual person. However, it also depends upon the broad state of the economy; on government strategies to help young people into employment; on the current level of success of certain industries and sectors of employment, and on the availability of training and further and higher education. As part of your literature review you would survey what has been written and researched on these broad areas and their connection with careers and employment of young people. Having established the scope of existing research you would be able to show how your dissertation fits into the previous sequence of studies. You would be better able to make out a case that your study adds something to what is known

about this matter. A literature review enables us to see how new studies and research are rather like building blocks, which are laid upon the ideas built by others.

A literature review therefore helps us to appreciate something of the sequence and growth of knowledge. As we survey the previous research on a subject, we may be able to identify areas which have not yet been investigated. These might suggest topics for future research projects, and also might suggest a particular focus or train of thought for our present dissertation. We thus can begin to think of knowledge as slowly accumulating in the past, and of research adding to this well into the future.

As you investigate what has been researched and previously written on a topic, you implicitly begin to justify the choice of subject for your own research. If a good many researchers have investigated different aspects of a particular topic in the past, then it is reasonable to assume it is an important topic. You might think, however, that there is a danger of repeating research, and hence making it very difficult to add to knowledge. This is not a problem which is likely to happen too often in the social sciences. For example, suppose that you are investigating the attitudes of a sample of 14-year-old school pupils to the issue of gender equality in society. You complete your interviews with the pupils, only to discover that a very similar piece of research was conducted two years ago in a school in a different part of the country. You are immediately worried that your research is not sufficiently original, and cannot possibly reveal anything new about the issue. Essentially, you need not worry.

The context of the first piece of research will have been very different. The school was different, and was located in a different catchment area in a different part of the country. The sample of pupils was certainly different. Besides the difference in the actual individuals, there may have been differences in the composition of the sample in terms of gender and ethnicity. The pupils will also have been taught by different teachers, and could be said to have had different educational experiences. We could go on listing such differences, but can sum this up by suggesting that there are so many different social variables between the two pieces of research, that there is little danger that the research will have been identical. In fact, sometimes this repetition of the theme of research is very useful in the social sciences, as it can reveal fresh nuances about a particular topic.

In a research study published in 2010, Shah, Dwyer and Modood examined some of the potential connections between educational achievement, social class and ethnicity. In the past there has been a good deal of research which has examined different contexts and permutations of the interaction between these variables. It is a contentious and problematic area, and no doubt there will be many further studies of various kinds which will examine the subject. It is an area in which there is a multiplicity of relevant literature, and yet the very complexity of the issues involved makes it relatively unlikely that any future studies could be seen as duplicating previous research.

Identifying the main subject and themes

By the time you start your literature review, you will probably have decided upon the main theme for your investigation, and also upon the key research objectives. To some extent therefore the essential task has been predetermined. You may have selected a research topic or theme around which a great deal of research has been previously conducted. If that is the case, it should not be difficult to find writing and research to review. In fact, the main difficulty may be in selecting what you want to include, and what you wish to exclude. However, if you have selected a fairly esoteric subject on which little has been written, then it may be difficult to find sufficient material to review. You may have to consider including a discussion of material which only exists on the periphery of the subject chosen.

There is every reason, therefore, when planning a research study or dissertation, that as many aspects of the research as possible are taken into account at the beginning.

Good practice



Research should not be treated as if it is a rigidly sequential process. In fact we often tend to present it like that in books, but it is not really an accurate picture. We can tend to think that we should select a research topic, then write the literature review, and then consider the kind of methodology to use. In fact, it is much more sensible to reflect upon all of these issues simultaneously during the planning and design phase of the research. Hence, before you finally decide on a research topic, it is best to conduct a quick survey of the available literature.

Are you happy with the range of literature which is available for this particular topic?

Does your chosen topic appear to fit in to a sequence of previous research studies?

In other words, decisions on research design are rarely taken in isolation, but should be seen as part of the overall research plan.

Suppose, for example, that you select the subject of business ethics for your research, and in particular wish to investigate the way in which products and raw materials are sourced from developing countries. It is difficult to decide on this subject with any certainty, without simultaneously taking into account

the available literature and the way in which you intend to collect your data. For example, you might discover that there is relatively little literature on business ethics in relation to the specific countries you wish to use in your project. You would then need to decide whether that was a serious limitation on the research, or whether there was sufficient relevant literature in connection with other countries. In addition, you would need to consider the type of data you anticipated collecting, and whether this was realistic in relation to the countries you were intending focusing on in the study. For example, if you intended collecting data in the actual countries, have you sufficient resources to visit these countries? In short, then, research design should always be considered as an organic whole, and not as a series of separate stages.

Another important consideration in terms of the choice of subject is whether it can be subdivided into appropriate topic areas. The literature review chapter in a dissertation is usually one of the longest chapters, and it is usually helpful if it can be subdivided into sections, each representing a sub-theme of the research topic. Sometimes it is possible to make a connection between each of these sub-themes and the objectives of the research. In the previous example on business ethics, two of the research objectives could have been:

- to analyze theories of ethics which are relevant to the conduct of business in developing countries;
- to examine ethical aspects of the sourcing of food products from two West African countries.

When planning the research design for a subject such as this, it would be worth considering whether there was sufficient literature on ethical theory relevant to the study, and also on the ethical trade in food. If not, it would be necessary to consider how else the available literature might be subdivided.

Reviewing previous research

One of the basic aspects of a literature review is that there needs to be some selection process to decide which literature to include and which to exclude. When writing a research report, a journal article or a dissertation, there will normally be a limit in terms of the number of words. Decisions will need to be taken on which writers to include, and on the depth of analysis to be devoted to each.

However, it is very important to appreciate that a literature review is not simply a survey of one author or researcher after another.

Common pitfall

In early drafts of student assignments it is fairly common to see a literature review which consists of the mention of a series of writers, each with a few sentences devoted to them. In the worst cases, there may be no logical order to the presentation of the writers, and no apparent justification for their inclusion, other than that their work is broadly within the subject area. In cases such as this, the reader of the literature review is left to try to impose some sort of rational order on what has been written. If the reader is an examiner, then it might not put them in a very good mood!

Remember that in a literature review:

- There should be a clear structure.
- There should be an explanation for that structure.
- The literature should be presented in a planned order, for which there is a clear rationale.

When a series of literature is presented, along with a brief commentary summarizing the content of the research or article, then this is much closer to what is usually termed an annotated bibliography. This can be very useful to read, particularly if you need to survey a field very rapidly. It can provide you with a quick picture of the scope of a research topic, and what some of the main researchers and writers have said. However, it is typically a much more limited piece of work, without the depth of analysis and discussion which is associated with a literature review.

Although as we have said, a literature review does need a structure, and a number of different sub-headings and sections, it is essentially written in an essay style of writing. This is sometimes known as a discursive style. In other words, it is a style of writing which includes a number of different features including summarizing, description, analysis, discussion, evaluation, reflection and comparison. In order to achieve this style, a literature review cannot be brief, which explains why it is often the longest chapter in a student dissertation.

A good literature review will reflect the analytic abilities of the writer. When you are initially surveying the literature on a subject, try to look for trends, developments, contradictions or similarities which other writers might have missed or perhaps not discussed. It is often possible to identify places in the literature where writers disagree on an issue. It often surprises students that researchers and university lecturers sometimes differ on their interpretation of data or the conclusions which they draw from evidence. However, data does not always suggest a single, clear-cut conclusion, and this is particularly so in

education and the social sciences where there are so many variables involved in research. If you can find instances where writers disagree on the interpretation of data, or where they take different approaches to an issue, this can often be very informative. It can, for example, shed light on the complexities of an academic issue, and help you explain that a question is not as straightforward as might be initially supposed.

Discussing previous research

Lever (2011), in a study of urban regeneration, contrasted two different views of government policy and strategy. On the one hand, he pointed out (p. 87) the perception of government as employing direct central control over the exercise and implementation of its policies. He then compared this model with a more recent practice of government allocating funds to partnerships which were expected to operate within fairly closely defined limits and parameters. Such semi-autonomous partnerships, while acting as an agent of government policy, did so with apparently more freedom of action. This contrasting of different models of government practice provided a framework within which the research could be analysed.

Emphasizing leading research studies

In any particular research area, some research studies will always be more influential than others. Some may be so influential that, in effect, they change the direction of a whole field of study. Research studies can become very influential for a variety of reasons:

- The research may develop and introduce new concepts which are widely applicable across the whole range of a field.
- These concepts may change the way we look at a subject area.
- They may therefore initiate many new avenues of research.
- They may result in the development of new methodological approaches.

When this happens, however, one of the almost inevitable results is that the research and the researcher become frequently mentioned in textbooks on the subject area, and are also widely cited by academic journal articles. So widely known is the research that you may indeed wonder whether it is worth mentioning it in your dissertation.

There is a matter of judgement here. If a particular study or theory has become in effect a classic or seminal work, and is widely taught at

undergraduate level in a subject, then it may only need a passing mention in a research dissertation. Not to mention it at all, would probably seem like an omission, but on the other hand, it may seem trite to go into the details of a piece of research which is widely understood. It is very difficult to give precise rules here. In fact, making an appropriate selection from the available literature is part of the skill of writing a good dissertation. As you begin to learn more and more about a subject area, you will develop confidence in terms of understanding the nature of the research which is regarded as important and developing the nature of the subject. You will then be better able to make decisions about which literature to describe in detail and which to mention only briefly.

Indeed, one can argue that it is a key function of a literature review to define for the reader, the areas of work which are becoming important and which will have a profound influence on a subject in the future. The ability to do this comes gradually with a growing confidence in terms of one's understanding of a subject. In order to be able to recognize the influential research and key writers, it is important to search for literature in the relevant places. The researchers who are contributing to current developments in a field may well publish in the outlets which have the shortest publishing period. For example, edited books may have a fairly long period between initial concept and publication. Paper-based journals may be quicker, and electronic journals may be the quickest of all. Conference proceedings may be published some time after the actual date of a conference, and so may be of variable publishing time. If you can manage to attend them, then academic conferences provide the opportunity to hear about current developments, and also to engage researchers in discussion about their work.

One possible way in which you could structure your literature review in order to emphasize leading studies is to adopt a historical perspective. You could divide the literature into historical periods, ranging from the older classical studies, through more recent studies, to the latest research. This approach would enable you to justify discussion of older studies, while at the same time concentrating upon the more recent, developmental research.

It is worth mentioning, however, that what constitutes leading research in an area is, to a certain extent, a subjective, ideological question. Academics or researchers working in an area will place different priorities upon different facets of current research. One researcher may favour a particular methodology. In educational research, for example, some academics may prefer **quantitative** approaches to a research issue, while others may favour **qualitative** approaches using phenomenology or interactionism. In purely rational terms, the theoretical perspective adopted for a research study should relate to the nature of the research question. Some research issues, for example, are more susceptible to a survey approach in order to gain an idea of broad trends. Other research questions, particularly if they involve the investigation of human feelings or motives, may be better investigated by using qualitative

approaches. When researchers work within a particular methodological framework on a regular basis, they can easily become very committed to that perspective. Hence they can favour those kinds of approaches, simply because they are working regularly within that perspective. Almost inevitably, if they are working regularly within a particular framework, they will tend to value more the latest research in that area, if only because they are more familiar with it. One can thus argue, that research, like other activities in life, has a number of different ideological perspectives, and individuals do tend to make choices, and to work within one framework rather than another. It may in fact be that research is not quite as objective as we often assume it to be.

Exploring key academic arguments

One of the interesting aspects of surveying the literature in a field is that it reveals the key concepts and ideas which form the basis for the study of that subject. Each distinctive area of a subject has its own range of concepts, which are used to express ideas in that subject. Some of these concepts may be shared with other academic areas, while some may be unique to the area in question. Understanding the concepts used to discuss and investigate a subject is central to having a full understanding of the subject.

When reading the literature of a subject, it is helpful to try to appreciate the nature of the concepts used. Some concepts such as 'motivation', 'feeling' or 'cognition' may be psychological in nature, while others such as 'socialization', 'community' or 'class' may be sociological. The former are concerned with the cognitive and thought processes of the individual person, while the latter are concerned with the place of the individual in society. Another range of concepts are those concerned with making value judgements. These are ethical or moral concepts, and are typically located in statements involving the words 'ought' or 'should'. If we say that 'this research should not be carried out unless we can guarantee the anonymity of respondents', then we are making a statement about research ethics. Some concepts may be concerned with the methodology of research. If there is considerable discussion in the literature about 'generalizability', 'sampling error' or 'empirical data', then we know that these concepts are concerned with issues of research methods.

Sometimes there will be a preponderance of certain types of concept within the literature of a subject area. Suppose we are surveying the literature on research in careers advice to young people. We might expect there to be a variety of concepts which are essentially psychological, since the career choices made by young people depend to some extent upon their personal psychological orientation. Some may prefer a practical job, for example, while others would prefer a job involving thinking and analysis skills. In order to give meaningful advice to young people we have to be able to interpret their psychological approach to the idea of a future job or career. When exploring

the literature on this subject we would expect to identify concepts of this nature.

However, sound careers advice also involves explaining to young people something about the way in which a job is perceived in society. Young people need perhaps to appreciate that some jobs are held in higher status than others. Such jobs may have better conditions of service, and a range of peripheral advantages, such as the opportunity to travel. This higher status may also be reflected in better pay, both initially and in the long term. Young people may not have the understanding or experience to appreciate these factors, and good careers advice will generally point them out. In literature about careers advice, you would therefore expect to find some concepts which are fundamentally sociological or economic in character.

Having established the key concepts, it is much easier to appreciate the way in which academic arguments fit together. For example, if you have an understanding of the social factors which determine the context of a job or career, it is easier to predict the way in which a particular job might develop in the future. It might also be easier to predict the type of skills which could become more important. It is evident, for example, that there are likely to be increasing financial constraints on the staffing position in many jobs for the long-term future. Staffing costs are the single most expensive element in many areas of employment. This is likely to have consequences for the nature of a variety of careers. In teaching, for example, at all age levels, it is likely that there will be more emphasis on computer-based, autonomous learning in order to free teachers for other tasks. This may mean that the job of the teacher in the future may require sophisticated computing skills, and the ability to develop curriculum packages for self-tuition.

Economic considerations have probably also had an influence upon techniques for detecting and combating crime. Foucault has written extensively on the increased use of surveillance techniques in postmodern society, and indeed we appear to see the use of police surveillance cameras more and more. Changes in the nature of policing therefore seem likely to transform the traditional nature of the job of a police officer. The increasingly technical nature of many jobs means that we are moving more towards a knowledge-based society.

However, when you conduct an analysis of the literature in an area such as career developments, it is important to acknowledge that individual writers may approach the subject from different perspectives. One writer may be personally very much in favour of new technological developments, and may see technology as a means of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of a job. On the other hand, a different writer may be much more in favour of person-centred approaches at work. The perspective of a writer or researcher can have a significant effect upon the way in which they approach a research question, the way in which they write about it, and the type of concepts which they use in analyzing it.

Examining older literature in an area

What counts as 'older' literature in a subject area is to some extent a subjective matter. In addition, the question of age, in terms of literature, certainly depends very much on the subject area, and indeed the question of the length of time that subject has been recognized as a distinct discipline. The subject of computing has existed for such a short period of time, that literature published in the 1960s is likely to be considered of great antiquity! On the other hand, in, say, philosophy or theology, writing from one thousand years ago may not be considered particularly ancient! There are therefore judgements to be made about first of all what will count as older literature in a particular discipline, and, second, at what stage we may define a scholarly work as 'classical', and perhaps not requiring full explication in a dissertation.

The answer to these questions depends very much upon the nature of the research question, and how this has been formulated. A research question or the subject for a dissertation is usually expressed in a fairly precise and focused manner. For example, in the area of business education, you may be researching the performance of students on Master of Business Administration (MBA) courses. By definition, there is an immediate limitation on the literature to the period since MBAs were first offered in universities. If the research question were limited to MBA programmes in England alone, then this would place further limitations on the literature. In a research study of the development of nurse education in universities in the United Kingdom, there would be fairly precise parameters drawn around the selection of literature. This is a recent development, and although there may be some mention of earlier literature, the majority of that reviewed would probably date from the initiation of university-based education for nurses.

To take a very different example, we could consider the case of someone researching 'The ideas of Plato in a national curriculum'. There are fairly clearly two main areas of literature to consider here, the work of Plato, particularly in terms of **epistemology**, and then the nature of a centrally determined curriculum. In terms of Plato you would no doubt discuss some philosophical articles by contemporary scholars, but you would also need to analyze primary sources such as *The Republic*. In other words, there would definitely be a need to discuss older literature here.

In the field of comparative religion, there is also very often a need to discuss older primary literature. In a study of 'Hindu ethics in contemporary Indian life', it would again be necessary to analyze two principal types of literature. You would need to decide on a number of ethical issues which were significant for various reasons in contemporary India, and then locate relevant literature. Second, however, you would need to analyze these in terms of Hindu teachings on morality and ethics. In order to do this systematically, it would be necessary to discuss the parts of Hindu scriptures, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*, which address ethics. You would also, of course, discuss writings where

academics discuss Hindu ethical principles, but it would also be better to examine the original scriptures.

Developing a historical perspective in the research

In any area of study, there will almost certainly have been a development and evolution of ideas. This 'history of ideas' may on some occasions have reflected parallel changes in society at large, or in other cases may have itself influenced society. In entire disciplines such as sociology, we can look back at the changes that have occurred. During its initial phase of development, with writers such as Comte and Durkheim, sociology was oriented very much towards quantitative approaches to measuring society. There was the assumption that society could be analyzed and measured in much the same way as physical phenomena could be investigated. Society was assumed to consist of a series of facts or **variables** which were related to each other in terms of scientific laws. The job of the sociologist was to uncover these laws.

As the study of the discipline continued, however, sociologists started to think of society in much more fluid terms. They began to view it less in terms of fixed laws, and more as something which was continually changing. They began to see it as a product of the interaction of human beings. Within this view, society is not seen as a fixed, objective entity, but as something which is continually constructed and reconstructed by human beings. To a certain extent, with some variations, this perspective has continued to this day.

The same kind of evolution of ideas has also occurred within narrower, more focused subject areas. As you survey the literature, and get to know the field better, you will be able to discern these kinds of historical trends. It is also worth noting that in many subject areas, academic work has been conducted in a variety of countries, not simply within the English-speaking world. One of the decisions you may need to take is whether, or to what extent, to discuss literature in other languages.

Portraying the literature on a subject in a historical sequence is a simple, and often attractive option. However, although presenting material in chronological order is one of the most basic and popular ways of structuring data, it does have a potential disadvantage. As the literature is presented in date order, from one section to another, there may not be any particular connection between one section of the literature and the next. The only connection is the chronological sequence. There may not be any connection in terms of themes, subject matter or trends. The ideal situation is where a historical sequence of the literature corresponds with a sequence of ideas, but this may simply not be the case. A simple historical sequence may be useful, but if a choice has to be made, then a thematic sequence of the development of ideas should reveal far more about the particular subject, and indeed the underlying development of concepts and knowledge within that area.

Summarizing new and developing knowledge in an area

One of the commonest fears of students is that just after they have handed in their dissertation for assessment, there will be some major development or study in their area of research! Even worse is the anxiety that the examiners for the dissertation will know about that research, and will ask them questions on it in the oral examination! Well, it is simply not possible to be absolutely up to date in a subject, and the examiners will realize that. However, a good literature review should present and analyze the latest research as far as is reasonably possible. In order to do this, you will need to search sources of literature such as conference proceedings, which present the latest research. During your research you may even be able to develop contacts with professional researchers, who will give you pre-published summaries of the work they are doing.

It is also important to bear in mind, as mentioned in the previous section, that there may be relevant sources of research available in languages other than English. The significance of this depends very much upon the subject area which you are researching. Where a topic is intimately connected with another country, then there will almost certainly be material being published in that country. In the area of Religious Studies, for example, if you were researching some aspect of the Sikh religion, then it would be sensible to survey publications from India, and particularly the Punjab. Some journal articles would be in English but others would be in Punjabi. The extent to which you could access these would depend upon your linguistic abilities or obtaining translations.

Some academics from non-English-speaking countries have had a major influence upon thinking in different disciplines. In France, for example, we could point to Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault in educational studies, and Jean Baudrillard in cultural studies. Foucault has also been influential in other areas such as criminology. The principal books of these writers have been translated into English and are widely available, but there remain many journal articles and conference papers, published in French, which would only be available to those able to translate from the original. Although it is easy to assume that English is almost becoming the lingua franca of academic study throughout the world, it is very important to remember the enormous amount of scholarly literature which is published all the time in other languages. For most types of research study you may not be expected to analyze literature in other languages, as it might arguably be unfair on the part of the examiners to expect you to be bilingual, but it would at least be possible to indicate in your literature review that such a body of research existed. It might also be possible using your school French, German or Spanish to survey some of the academic journals in other languages, in order to indicate where articles on a topic were being published. If you could do this, it would show an awareness of the scope of publication in an area.

In terms of identifying the most recent research in an area, it may also be that in some topics research in the country of origin of a particular thinker or issue may be more up to date than in English-speaking countries. In the country of origin, researchers will have access to all kinds of contextual material and data which will be unavailable in other countries. They will also be able to make links and connections with other writers from that country. Imagine, for example, a research student in, say, Norway or Italy, writing a dissertation on Shakespeare, and using only sources published in their own country and language. We would find this rather strange to say the least! In a globalized academic world, we need increasingly to take a very broad view in terms of identifying key literature on a subject.

It is also worth noting that the latest research in some areas is publicized in populist media sources. Researchers in areas such as clinical research or education, will sometimes disseminate their provisional findings in newspaper or magazine articles, or on the radio, in order to raise awareness of their work. This often helps in attracting a larger audience for the research, and perhaps even, in some types of research, to attract additional funding. From the point of view of the student, it can be very useful in drawing attention to the latest research, and subsequently enabling you to seek out more formal articles written by the researcher or research team.

Writing about a new and developing area

There can be both advantages, and at the same time, distinct difficulties, about analyzing a new area of research. Hedenus (2011), for example, decided to investigate the lives of lottery winners. She decided to examine the manner in which they conducted their lives after their winning. The advantage of a new topic is that it is likely to be a relatively under-researched area, and therefore offers new opportunities. On the other hand, with new topics it is not always easy to identify research samples when there is not a great deal of existing previous research to act as a model.

Identifying gaps in our understanding of a subject

We cannot know everything about a subject, and almost inevitably there will be gaps in our knowledge. These gaps in understanding may be due to a variety of factors. Within a particular subject area:

- Some issues may appear less interesting to researchers.
- Some topics may attract less public attention.
- Some research questions may not have attracted research funding in the past.
- It may be more difficult to collect data on some issues.

In a perfect world, it may be desirable first to identify an apparent gap in the research literature, and then to develop your research proposal in that area. However, it is not necessary to think that research should always be on a subject within a gap in the literature. Valuable research can be done in terms of investigating a well-researched area. It is often extremely useful to obtain results which apparently confirm previous findings, or in fact, which do not confirm previous findings. Karl Popper's Theory of **Falsification** argues that scientific enquiry should primarily be concerned with seeking empirical evidence which falsifies previous findings. He argued that this was more methodologically rigorous than always looking for data to support a theory.

Nevertheless, one of the useful outcomes of a literature search should be to identify apparent gaps in previous research. The existence of a gap in the literature should at the very least cause us to try to find an explanation for this, and such an enquiry may result in a more sophisticated understanding of the subject matter.

In some subject areas research may be largely non-commercial; that is, there will be no immediately evident possibilities for income generation from the research. In many areas of educational research this is the case. In areas such as this, the possibility of income generation is not a key factor in deciding which area will attract the most research studies. However, in other disciplines, particularly in technology, engineering and the applied sciences, there will be many potential economic advantages for some types of research. Potential industrial and commercial applications will generally lead to research sponsorship of various kinds or of the possibility of patentable products. The possibility of income generation may be a major factor in determining that one area or issue is extensively researched, while another issue attracts relatively little attention.

Exploring trends in the literature

One of the functions of a literature review is to identify the broad developments or trends in the way literature on a subject is developing. However, the way in which this is achieved, and the particular trends which are identified, depend to some considerable extent upon the focus of the review. For example, a literature review might focus primarily upon methodological developments in a subject, or it might tend to concentrate upon the way in which social and political changes have affected research on a subject. In some cases, one might argue that methodological trends are linked to social changes.

In educational research there has sometimes been a tendency to concentrate on quantitative measures. Attempts have been made to relate social class to educational performance. Various models have been developed in order to measure social class, and to relate these to quantitative measures of student

performance. Quantitative research has tended to be popular with social planners and politicians, who are seeking to understand broad trends in society, in order to make large scale economic decisions about educational policy. Quantitative research has also tended to be employed when people want to measure trends in performance across the country, or even to compare educational performance in different countries. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, have tended to be used when it was necessary to understand something of the detailed lives of people, and how they interacted with each other.

One of the ways in which trends can be discussed in the literature, is to examine first of all the publications which tend to address the broad issues in a subject area, and then to analyze the literature which concerns the more specific topics of your research subject. In other words, there is a progressive focusing from the general issues to the those more narrowly related to the subject. It is generally easier to locate literature on the broader themes of a topic since it is possible to cast a net fairly wide in the search for suitable material. As you focus more and more narrowly towards your specific dissertation subject, you may find some difficulty in locating literature. This may be that you are being too demanding on yourself, in trying to find literature which is closely related to a very specific subject. You may have chosen such a precise, narrow subject for your dissertation that very little research has been done on it before. If that is the case, then you will probably need to broaden the scope slightly, of the kind of the literature you are seeking.

An example of moving gradually from a general topic, to focusing on a more specific one, occurs in a research article by van de Werfhorst and Luijckx (2010) on the subject of social background and education. The article starts by noting generally 'that inequality of educational opportunity is prevalent in many western and non-western societies' (p. 695). The article then proceeds to a more specific concept of 'effectively maintained inequality' (p. 696).

Summarizing key ideas in a subject area

Determining what you consider to be the main trends in the literature you have analyzed is related to the question of the key ideas in the subject. The decision as to the main trends almost inevitably involves a decision about the key research studies and hence the key ideas in a subject area. The nature of some of the key ideas will be determined because they are in effect the seminal ideas, probably associated with internationally known researchers and writers. However, the other ideas which you choose to highlight will to some extent reflect your own subjective position on the research articles which you have located. You may be influenced by the author of the article, whom you perhaps know has written several other influential articles. You might also be

aware that some writers have been cited in other articles you have read, which gives them a certain credibility. You may have eliminated the conclusions and ideas from some articles, because you feel there are methodological failings in the research. On the other hand, you may have included some articles because you feel that there is the potential for future research based on them, or that their ideas are potentially influential within a broader perspective.

Overall, the selection of the key ideas from a body of literature is a very important function of a literature review, and reflects the analytic process undertaken by the researcher. This selection process also inter-relates with the attempt to define an original contribution to knowledge from within the research dissertation. Part of the concept of a contribution to knowledge is that the latter interlinks with the key areas of knowledge as previously defined.

When you are writing the conclusion to your research and making out the case for the contribution to knowledge made by the dissertation, it is good practice to refer back to the literature review. In this way, you link together the different elements of the dissertation, and help to create a piece of writing which is a coherent whole.

Key terms

Epistemology: the study of the grounds upon which we believe something to be true.

Falsification: the assertion (often associated with the philosopher Karl Popper), that it is logically more rigorous to gather data in order to attempt to negate a theory, than to support it.

Qualitative data: data which is in the form of words, e.g. interview transcripts or historical documents.

Quantitative data: data which is in numerical form, e.g. questionnaire responses or measurements.

Variable: in research, a quantity which varies in nature or magnitude.

Key questions

- 1 If you have already chosen your research subject, and yet cannot find very much specific literature on it, what strategies could you use?
- 2 If you want some of the literature you use to be very recent, what would be the best kind of literature to use?

- 3 In what ways would you try to link a literature review with other parts of the dissertation, in order to ensure that the dissertation was a coherent whole?

Key reading

- Aveyard, H. (2010) *Doing a Literature Review in Health and Social Care: A Practical Guide*, 2nd edn. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
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- Machi, L.A. and McEvoy, B.T. (2009) *The Literature Review: Six Steps to Success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
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