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How to Write a Literature Review

Andrew S. Denney and Richard Tewksbury

Learning how to effectively write a literature review is a critical tool for success for an academic, and perhaps even professional career. Being able to summarize and synthesize prior research pertaining to a certain topic not only demonstrates having a good grasp on available information for a topic, but it also assists in the learning process. Although literature reviews are important for one's academic career, they are often misunderstood and underdeveloped. This article is intended to provide both undergraduate and graduate students in the criminal justice field specifically, and social sciences more generally, skills and perspectives on how to develop and/or strengthen their skills in writing a literature review. Included in this discussion are foci on the structure, process, and art of writing a literature review.

What is a Literature Review?

In essence, a literature review is a comprehensive overview of prior research regarding a specific topic. The overview both shows the reader what is known about a topic, and what is not yet known, thereby setting up the rationale or need for a new investigation, which is what the actual study to which the literature review is attached seeks to do. Stated a bit differently (Creswell 1994, pp. 20, 21) explains:

> The literature in a research study accomplishes several purposes: (a) It shares with the reader the results of other studies that are closely related to the study being reported (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1990. (b) It relates a study to the larger, ongoing dialog in the literature about a topic, filling in gaps and extending prior studies (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). (c) It provides a framework for establishing the importance of the study.

As an overview, a well done literature review includes all of the main themes and subthemes found within the general topic chosen for the study. These themes and subthemes are usually interwoven with the methods or findings of the prior research. Also, a literature review sets the stage for and

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offers readers justifications for the purpose and methods of the original research being reported in a manuscript. Said a bit differently, "The literature review is where you identify the theories and previous research which have influenced your choice of research topic and the methodology you are choosing to adopt" (Ridley, 2008, p. 2).

The most common and most appropriate sources to draw upon and use as evidence in a review of a topic are articles found in academic journals and books. However, the availability of academic journal articles may vary tremendously depending on the research topic chosen. Other commonly accepted resources to use are governmental publications and newspaper articles to just name a few. The literature review needs to identify and discuss/explain all of the main points or findings of a specific topic. Also, both classic (if available) and the most recent studies need to be included to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the topic at hand.

Why is it Important?

Literature reviews are important for a number of reasons. Primarily, literature reviews force a writer to educate him/herself on as much information as possible pertaining to the topic chosen. This will both assist in the learning process, and it will also help make the writing as strong as possible by knowing what has/has not been both studied and established as knowledge in prior research. Second, literature reviews demonstrate to readers that the author has a firm understanding of the topic. This provides credibility to the author and integrity to the work's overall argument. And, by reviewing and reporting on all prior literature, weaknesses and shortcomings of prior literature will become more apparent. This will not only assist in finding or arguing for the need for a particular research question to explore, but will also help in better forming the argument for why further research is needed. In this way, the literature review of a research report "foreshadows the researcher's own study" (Berg, 2009, p. 388).

It is important to keep in mind that it is not realistic to expect readers to be familiar with all of the relevant background and pre-existing knowledge about any topic. Scientific knowledge (about all topics) accumulates rapidly, and keeping up on any topic can be a challenge. This is not a new idea, three decades ago (Cooper, 1984, p. 9) argued:

> Given the cumulative nature of science, trustworthy accounts of past research form a necessary condition for orderly knowledge building. Yet, research methods textbooks in the social sciences show a remarkable lack of attention to how an inquirer finds, evaluates, and integrates past research. This inattention is especially troubling today because the social sciences have recently undergone a huge increase in the amount of research being conducted ... (T)he need for trustworthy accounts of past research is also strengthened by growing specialization with the social sciences.

In regards to the professional importance of a good literature review for a manuscript that reports on the results of an original research project, it may be important to know that literature reviews are commonly focused upon components of manuscripts under review for publication. In a survey of criminal justice and criminology journal manuscript, reviewers Mustaine and Tewksbury (2008) reported that more than three-quarters (76.9%) of manuscript reviewers say that the quality of a manuscript's literature review is an important influence on their review. Similarly, surveyed criminal justice and sociology journal editors report that the literature review in a manuscript is a highly important aspect of a manuscript (Mustaine & Tewksbury, in press). And, when looking just at the content of reviews for manuscripts at the top tier journal *Justice Quarterly*, problems with literature reviews are the fourth (of nine) most commonly criticized portions of reviewed manuscripts, with fully 57% of manuscripts cited for problems in the literature review (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 2012). Interestingly, it is the graduate students and assistant professors who, as manuscript reviewers, are most likely to cite problems with reviewed manuscripts' literature reviews.

What Does a Literature Review Include?

First and foremost, literature reviews include a comprehensive overview of a general topic. For example, if there was a study on whether alcohol abuse leads to the tendency to commit violent crimes, then it would need to have an overview of substance abuse issues (not just alcohol abuse) and how such may influence all types of crime. First, the review of this literature should start with the general topic of substance abuse and how it influences committing all types of crime. Then, it should discuss different types of substance abuse (i.e. prescription drug abuse, alcohol abuse, etc.). Next, it would need to discuss the influence of substance abuse on general types of crime (i.e. petty theft, property crimes, violent crimes, etc.). Finally, it would need to focus on the primary subtopics of alcohol abuse (i.e. psychological affects, behavioral affects, etc.) and its direct influence on committing violent crimes. In essence, the literature review goes from a broad overview to a specific focus by using subtopics of the general research question to guide the focus to a specific research question that the author wants to address.

One important characteristic of the review of the literature on a particular topic that is somewhat different from articles or manuscripts that report on the findings of individual studies is that whereas reports of individual studies almost always report findings that show the existence of a relationship, a literature review may conclude that there actually is not a relationship between particular concepts, variables, or issues (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). In this way, a literature review may be important for what it tells readers we know is *not* present in the social world.

What Various Foci Should a Literature Review Take?

Literature reviews can take on a number of different focuses that vary according to the type of research question that the review functions to set up in the current study. The primary focus will be related to the individual concepts of the general research question. However, how this is done will differ from study to study. Also, it is important that these concepts cover the entire (relevant and related) scope of previous literature pertaining to the current research topic, even if it does not directly coincide with it. When identifying and discussing/explaining these concepts, be sure to emphasize the findings of prior studies, or what the contribution to our knowledge about the topic is for each study. These reported findings should fall under the overarching concepts for the general research topic, and they should not be listed one after another. Rather, a literature review should educate the reader about what individual studies have contributed to our accumulated knowledge, but do so with a focus on discussing concepts or themes or types of issues related to the general topic. Generally speaking, literature reviews will have one of the three types of focuses (Cooper, 1984). Reviews may be integrative (summarizing past research based on overall conclusions of the past research), theoretical (identifying and critiquing the ability of different theories to explain a phenomenon, or methodological (highlighting different methodological approaches used in past research and the contributions of each type of research) in focus.

Regardless of the specific focus, it is crucial that there is a flow throughout the literature review, connecting the concepts somewhat seamlessly. A common error that reflects a mistargeted literature review is to string together a series of sentences or paragraphs that tell the reader study A found this, study B found this, and study C found this. A literature review should not read like a series of annotations about individual studies/articles. A literature review must have a clear focus on what the research question is that is going to be studied, and the organization of the discussion should lead the reader from the very broad general topic down to the specific issue about which a manuscript is going to report a new piece of research. In this way, by the end of the literature review, the reader should have a solid understanding of what is already known about the topic, what is not yet known, and therefore a good idea of what exactly the current study is going to examine, and why.

What are Qualitative and Quantitative studies?

All research studies fall into one of two basic categories. These are the two categories of qualitative and quantitative studies. Qualitative studies are typically those that wish to gain understanding regarding the interactions that take place within a certain social world. For example, someone wanting to study how gang leaders function in their world, how they interact with others (including gang members, leaders of other gangs, and regular people)

and how they perceive their role in the community would find that a qualitative approach would be best. Some of the most common ways to conduct a qualitative study are observation, participant observation, and interviews. It is best to think of qualitative studies as wanting to understand the actual ways that a social world functions and how the participants in a particular social world go about living, working, interacting, and feeling about their place in that setting.

A quantitative study is where researchers typically want to identify whether or not a statistical relationship exists between variables and how strong or prevalent such a relationship is. For example, if someone wants to understand the relationship between individuals' level of education and their tendency to commit property crime, then they would most likely have to examine this relationship through the quantitative approach. The most common way that this study would be conducted would be to use a survey or to construct measures of educational achievement and crimes committed from official sources, and then conduct statistical analyses to identify any potential relationships between the variables of education and crime type. Surveys in criminal justice and criminology official records are the most common form of data used for statistical analysis in quantitative social science studies.

Whether the project at hand is a qualitative or quantitative study has a strong influence on the general design of the literature review that accompanies the reporting of a study (see Randolph, 2009). The research question typically dictates what type of methods a study will have to use (i.e. qualitative or quantitative). This topic will be addressed in further detail in the section below.

Differences Between Writing Literature Reviews for Quantitative and Qualitative Studies

Qualitative

Whether the research question is qualitative or quantitative, heavily determines how a literature review should be constructed. For qualitative research questions, literature reviews need to focus on how a research question—that is usually broader than a hypothesis to be tested in a quantitative study—is shown to be needed to be addressed. This means that in a literature review for a qualitative study, there needs to be an all inclusive approach to the general research topic. In continuance with the above example, if the research question is how alcohol abuse influences the tendency to commit violent crime, then it would be necessary to include the general theme of substance abuse and how it influences committing all forms of crime. Additionally, there needs to be only a minor degree of focus on the methods of previous studies and more focus on the specific findings of prior studies. This is a key difference between qualitative and quantitative that will be discussed in further detail in

the quantitative section. It is also important to discuss whether or not prior quantitative studies have been conducted on the current research topic. If there has been, then it is essential that there is a discussion or an explanation of why it is important for the research question being set up by the literature review to use a qualitative approach instead of a quantitative approach. This will help strengthen the argument for the current research and convince a reader that the new study being reported on is in fact important and contributing to the accumulation of knowledge about the topic at hand. Remember, although different, the two types of studies (quantitative and qualitative) can greatly strengthen each other and work together to provide a more complete understanding of the desired research topic.

It is also important to remember that each research type has its own set of limitations. For qualitative studies, the limitations generally are related to particularistic (i.e. small) samples or perhaps even a small scope of settings that are examined. It is often the case with qualitative studies that the literature review will borrow from several different themes or arguments to construct one all-inclusive theme. This all-inclusive theme will help in demonstrating why a new approach that prior studies have not done or completed is needed. By drawing on multiple themes/arguments, it will simultaneously strengthen the argument being made throughout the current study and give confidence to the readers that the current topic has been researched in great depth.

Quantitative

Literature reviews for quantitative studies need to discuss both what previous studies pertaining to the research topic have found/concluded and how such studies were done in terms of the specific variables used and the operationalizations of key (especially dependent) variables. Reviews used to introduce and set up quantitative studies also focus more heavily on the methods used in prior studies when compared to qualitative studies. The methods that need to be present in the literature review are both those that in previous studies are common as well as those that represent new "advances" in how to do a particular conceptual definition, measurement, or analysis. This will primarily depend on the specific variables and how prior research has been conducted on the research topic.

It may be best to think of quantitative literature reviews as defining and describing the shapes of pieces of a puzzle in order to construct the complete focus of the intended research topic. Here, the literature review will need to show how particular variables and/or findings are common (or not) across the field of existing studies about the current research topic. By providing documentation of particular variables and findings, this approach facilitates readers having more confidence in the validity and reliability of the findings in the current study.

Outlining the Literature Review

Now that it is clear that literature reviews vary depending on the type of research question being investigated by a study, it is necessary to discuss the process of outlining. Outlining is perhaps the most important step in writing a successful literature review. Having a well-thought and planned outline will assist in searching for necessary types of information and sources, save time while writing, and allow for a clearer and stronger argument for readers.

Although most people hear the word "outline" and become worried and overwhelmed with properly ordering ideas, being certain they have a point #2 for every point #1, being sure that a subpoint A is followed by a subpoint B, etc., such strict structures are not necessary. Outlines are important, for as Machi and McEvoy (2009, p. 134) explain: "Outlining serves three purposes. It acts as (a) a mechanism for integrating and transforming ideas, (b) a mechanism of sequencing those ideas, and (c) a general plan for the composition." The outline is simply the map of what you intend to discuss, and how.

The first step in creating an outline is choosing a general topic to study. This topic needs to be general because choosing a limited topic at the outset might severely reduce the amount and quality of sources to be found, and might even lead to wasting a fair amount of time. The key is choosing something of interest without too specific of a focus. For example, if one's interest was in felon disenfranchisement, they would not choose only felon disenfranchisement as the topic to be reviewed. This is too narrow of a topic that is likely to yield a relatively small body of work and sources to draw upon, and therefore, will be too limiting in allowing the writer to establish an overview of the topic. As a result, it would be more appropriate to focus on a topic such as collateral consequences of felony convictions. These are two subcategories that are somewhat broad, but not too much to where it will hinder the process of identifying and discussing existing knowledge and sources of information. Also, each subcategory has several different subtopics/themes within that could be the focus of an entirely new study. It is also important to remember that it is okay to modify, revise, or refocus the topic after initially choosing one. This is a natural progression of developing an outline. New ideas and research questions will likely emerge throughout the entire outlining process, perhaps even when it is thought to be nearly complete. This emergence of new ideas and research questions will do nothing but strengthen the scope and soundness of the argument for the current study.

The second process in outlining is adding evidence to the general topic, leading to a more specific focus. This will also become a natural progression from finding what the general topic will be from the previous step and reading the available literature that addresses the general topic. Think of this process as similar to building a puzzle. Each source for the general topic will likely lead to several other useful sources with their own set of themes or subtopics, each being their own puzzle piece, until the entire picture is visible. These

sources will also likely present nearly all of the subtopics for the relevant topic, and will set the parameters for guiding where and how to look for other applicable sources. It is also important to note that all of the evidence needed to produce an adequate literature review will very rarely be found prior to the beginning of the writing process. As with finding other relevant sources, this is a natural progression of the writing process. New ideas will likely appear, and gaps that need to be filled will become more apparent once writing begins. This introduces the notion of the outline as being a "living" or "fluid" document. It not only is acceptable to constantly be altering the outline once an initial draft has been formed, but doing so is expected. Additionally, if an outline does not change once the writing process begins; it likely is going to be a weak literature review with several noticeable flaws—because the writer failed to pursue and include ideas and areas of knowledge that emerged in the writing process. Writers of literature reviews need to embrace the "living" nature of the outline as each minor change is leading to a stronger and more complete literature review. Similarly, when later working with your outline and actually writing sentences, paragraphs, and sections, the process of revising and moving portions of text to different locations is natural and expected. Here, it is useful to think of the overall writing process in the way suggested by Machi and McEvoy (2009) who distinguish between the process of Writing to Understand and Writing to be Understood. The first is the goal of your outline and initial drafting of your manuscript. Once you have things down in a way that you can understand, your task shifts (in your revised and final drafts of a manuscript) to writing in such a way that a reader can and will understand.

In the outlining process, once the initial subtopics and themes for the general topic have been identified, the next step is to simply place them in a logical order. In other words, the subtopics need to be sign posts that direct the reader from the broad theme to the specific focus of what the current study will be about. The first type of sequence can sometimes come from the main topic itself as to what flow it will take. For example, if the current research topic is about whether juvenile substance abuse rehabilitation centers reduce recidivism, then the literature review could start with a brief history of juvenile substance abuse centers. The brief history section would then be followed by, current numbers of juvenile substance abuse centers, known benefits of these programs, programming impact on recidivism, and what variety of centers are most successful in reducing recidivism. A different type of sequence for a literature review can be based on the commonality of themes. An example of organizing the literature review from most common to least common is doing a quantitative study on the relationship between education level and the likelihood of committing violent crimes. The literature review would briefly introduce and discuss the idea of education and the influence of education on committing crime, then change focus from what the existing body of knowledge has established as the most common ways that education influences crime to the least common methods. As the ways by which education influences crime commission are chronicled within the discussion of each "way,"

where there would be shown the studies that establish/support this as a means by which education influences crime as well. A third type of sequence is going from most positive issues to the most negative issues (or vice versa). An example of this approach is when evaluating successful sex offender reentry programs to list the most successful programs to the least successful programs, and within the discussion of each type of program identifying and showing what previous research has established the fact that each particular type of reentry program is (or is not) successful. In this way, the literature review functions to establish and support the need for the research question for the present study. Although each type of sequence is useful, choosing the correction sequence will largely depend upon the current research question.

As stated above, it is important to remember that outlines are "living" or "fluid" documents. The outline may seem complete, but obvious weaknesses may appear once the writing process of the actual literature review begins. It is inevitable that the subtopics, themes, organization, content, and even the main topic itself may all change throughout the writing process. Even though this may initially seem discouraging, it is as vital of a part to the writing process as writing itself. If time allows, it is helpful to develop the outline and let it sit a few days to help to make sure nothing obvious has been overlooked.

Sources

With the outline being the foundation, sources serve as the building blocks that construct the walls of the entire structure of the literature review. Adequate sources not only tell the reader about prior research regarding a topic, they also inform the author of prior research findings. Finding and reading the sources is an extended process of developing the themes and subtopics of what will be included within the literature review. Also, they help expand and elaborate upon the general research topic. However, it is essential to know where the sources are located, and which sources are acceptable to use in the literature review.

Where Are Sources Found?

Sources can be found in a number of ways. The main way is through the online databases at any university or college library website. These databases are usually searchable through the traditional Boolean search process that allows the user to enter key words of themes pertaining to the topic, resulting in a return of resources that the particular institution may have. This database primarily will feature academic journal articles that the library either does or does not subscribe to, and increasingly common with articles being available in digital format for download instantly. Although the majority of recently published articles are typically available for download, the availability of

downloadable digital copies will vary from institution to institution, and from source to source. Remember that even if a library does not have a digital copy, they may very well have a physical copy of the journal in the library. At this point, it would be best to make a photocopy of the physical journal article at the library in order to be able to do work outside of the library. Also, this will allow for future reference to the article if at any point certain findings within it need to be clarified.

Most university libraries also have a system called Interlibrary Loan. This system allows for a network of libraries—often state school networks—to share their resources among one another. This becomes extremely helpful since most institutional libraries do not have every single journal subscription, article, and/or book needed. Each institution has their own way of requesting documents through Interlibrary Loan, but they usually take no longer than a few days to be available for pickup. This is why it is a key that if a literature review is due for a class that the project is planned and sources are found well in advance of the due date to avoid issues if Interlibrary Loan is needed.

Other sources, such as books and newspaper/magazine articles can also be found through online databases. These databases will usually disclose whether or not the institution has what is needed, and at many libraries it will also provide a link to the Interlibrary Loan to request the exact item. Alternative databases should be used with caution; however, they can still be helpful. Databases such as Google Scholar have become extremely useful resources that may allow access to journals that may not be possible through an institution's library.

What Types of Sources are Appropriate to Use?

There are a number of appropriate types of sources that can be utilized to make and support an argument in a literature review. Sources can be thought of as having varying degree of value, or "strength," in a literature review. Berg (2009, p. 389) listed the potential sources and their relative value in the order of:

(1) Scholarly empirical articles, dissertations, and books.
(2) Scholarly, nonempirical articles and essays.
(3) Textbooks, encyclopedias, and dictionaries.
(4) Trade journal articles.
(5) Certain nationally and internationally recognized "good" newsmagazines.

The top two most appropriate sources are academic journal articles and academic books (not textbooks). Although textbooks can be helpful for identifying basic information, they should not be used as citations in literature reviews (although, they often cite or discuss major or classic studies about a topic). Therefore, it is most appropriate to use academic journal articles and

books. The number and quality of these two types of sources will vary tremendously from topic to topic.

Other appropriate sources are government publications (i.e. gray literature) newspaper articles, and magazine articles. Government publications typically cover program evaluations of certain programs operated by government agencies and even up-to-date statistics on particular governmental agencies. For example, the US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (http://www.bjs.gov) is an excellent source for governmental publications, especially when seeking the most recent statistics regarding specific crimes, criminal justice processes, populations, or governmental programs. Another excellent resource for criminal justice related documents is the Department of Justice website (http://www.justice.gov/publications). Other common types of alternative sources—newspaper and magazine articles—should be used sparingly and when no other information can be found. For example, if the current research topic is on budget cuts to juvenile substance abuse programs and anecdotal evidence is needed to support a theme found in research, then a newspaper/magazine article might be an excellent source to make this point. However, these supplementary sources should be used sparingly and with caution because heavily relying on these sources may send a red flag to the reader that (A) there may not be enough known about the current research topic to do any sufficient in-depth studies and/or (B) the literature review may have been constructed poorly (especially if other sources do exist and are not used). Therefore, it is crucial that a delicate balance is found and that alternative sources—such as newspaper and magazine articles—are only used when necessary. When in doubt, it is safest to use academic journal articles and books when available.

Inclusion of Classic/Major Pieces and More Recent Studies

The extensiveness of the available literature will vary tremendously from topic-to-topic. An example of this is comparing the availability of literature for a research question pertaining to social learning theory vs. a research question regarding computer privacy. In this case, it is purely a matter of the date when the research or issue began. However, the availability can be for several reasons. Other reasons for there being only a minimal amount of research available to draw upon include that perhaps the selected topic is a difficult subject matter—such as sexually deviant behaviors—that may have less research on them due to Institutional Review Board difficulties, lack of interest on the part of researchers, or stigmas attached to those who do such work or even legal and ethical reasons that limit the number of studies done on a topic. Obviously, other topics, such as stress experiences of law enforcement officers are likely to have much more research available. Therefore, it is vital that prior to beginning the outlining/writing process that the availability of sources is taken into consideration. Additionally, it is important to assess what kind of

a timeline is possible to establish for a topic; if something is truly a new phenomenon (such as, say the use of cell phones in prisons) there will be less available literature to work with than for a more established topic that has been a focus of research for a longer period of time. It is not necessary that this timeline is written down; however, it can do nothing but help in conceptually placing the available information on a continuum for clarity sake.

Although it is important to include a mixture of classic and more recent studies in the literature review, there also exists a balance that will vary from topic-to-topic. The best framework to follow when deciding what/what not to include in the classic studies is to only include the cornerstone research of the topic. For example, if the current topic was the stigma of being labeled a convicted felon and the social disenfranchisement that can accompany that label, then it would be necessary to include Erving Goffman's *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. In addition, it may be useful to include Herbert Blumer's works on *Symbolic Interactionism Theory* that deals with how individuals use symbols and verbal/nonverbal cues to interact and communicate with one another. By including classic pieces of research, it demonstrates to readers that the author is well versed in the literature and has consulted most prior literature when forming their research topic. Additionally, this is a vital part of the learning process that will help in learning the material throughout to better form the argument and be confident in continuing with the current research question.

The inclusion of the most recent research is as vital, if not even more important, than the inclusion of classic pieces. This is because it shows that the author has consulted the most recent literature, and that the most up-to-date methods have been used or perhaps that the specific focus of the current study has not been examined previously. Consulting prior work is crucial because there is a strong possibility that someone may have already done the research question that was going to be examined; however, this does not mean that one cannot continue with the current research question. This may mean that one would have to look at a different angle of the research question, or perhaps simply examining an area that was omitted in prior research. Ultimately, the inclusion of the most recent research is just as important (if not more so) to demonstrate to readers that prior literature has been consulted in the formation of the current research topic.

What Needs to be Included from the Cited Studies?

First and foremost, the findings of the prior literature need to be the bulk of what is included from the cited studies. Again, this may vary for each research questions; however, this will almost always be the case. It is best to think of findings as providing the "big picture" of the current research topic. Each theme and subtopic needs to be supported by as many findings as possible, so that both the author and the reader can have the entire picture of what is

known regarding the current topic. Findings of studies in journal articles are almost always found under the "findings" or "results" heading located in the second half of the journal article. For books, the location of findings varies, but they are usually located under the relevant chapter heading from the table of contents.

The literature reviews of other research can also be a valuable source in gaining insight into other relevant literature, themes/subtopics of the research question, and information regarding other sources. If citations are found through reading the literature reviews of prior research, it is important that the citations are double-checked to ensure that they were correctly cited in the original document. Also, the newly found resource may have other pertinent information that was left out of the literature review where the source was found. It is even possible that the additional citations revealed by reading additional literature reviews will bring awareness to a hole in the outline or even a missed theme. Remember that this is alright; this occurring will only further demonstrate the "fluid" nature of the "living" document that is the literature review being written.

Although the majority of literature reviews will focus on the findings of prior research, there are times where literature reviews need to focus on the methodology of prior research. This instance is typically found in studies that want to advance a new method for studying a certain topic or suggest a new way of defining a critical concept/variable. An example of this is a study that wants to advance a different way of statistical analysis. This study would need to primarily focus on the methodology of prior research since it is the subject of the current research question. Here, it is a simple substitution of the methods for the findings in what is presented to readers. Similarly, if a literature review is being written to set up a study of sexual victimization of prison inmates in which a new way of defining "sexual victimization" is used, it is important to review how previous studies have defined the concept, focusing on what is and is not included in the definitions previously used. Even though substituting methodology for the findings may seem to be a radically different approach to reviewing literature, it is essentially the same idea and process, just with a different aspect of previous work as the focal point. Whereas the previous examples showed organizing findings to make an argument of what prior studies have not examined, this type of literature review makes the same type of argument discussing what prior methodology is/has not been capable of doing. By showing what prior methodological weaknesses exist, this helps establish the argument that a new way of doing methodology or perhaps an entirely new methodological concept is needed.

Theory

Theory is a highly developed form of reasoning for why certain events occur. In the criminal justice field, theory typically applies to ideas of why people

commit crime and how the criminal justice agencies function. It is best to think of theory as the conscience behind the reasoning, methods, and what is ultimately found in the current study. Theory helps inform nearly all aspects of not just the literature review, but also the methodology and how to ultimately interpret the findings of the study.

The use of theory is not universal across all literature reviews. One example of a type of literature review that does not need to include a large discussion of theory is when a research question is new or in the early developmental stages. This can be the case even more so in exploratory work; however, this depends on how specific the topic or research question is. If theory is used, it is important that it is at least introduced and the reader told what the guiding perspective is for the study in the first few paragraphs of the literature review. This is important so as to establish a conceptual framework for the remaining portions of the literature review. It is best to think of theory in this sense as a lens to view the entire work through. This will help set up how and in what light the prior literature will be evaluated.

After the theory is briefly introduced, it is important to be reintroduced after a general overview of the topic has been discussed or outlined. This will allow the reader to have a broad understanding of the research question for the particular literature review without bogging them down with the theory as soon as they begin to read it. In this way, both the entire literature review and any actual section devoted to discussing a particular theory in specific can be thought of as "the theoretical core of an article" (Kotze, 2007, p. 19). Next, the theory needs to be discussed in depth, and explicitly shown as relevant to the topic at hand after the broad overview, in order for the reader to have the proper lens to analyze the prior findings or employed methodologies. It is similar to think of this as expecting someone to play football who has never been exposed to the rules of the game before. They need to know how the objective of the game, how the game is played, what rules the game follows, and how their position fits into the big picture of the game. The best way to ensure that information overload does not occur is to provide a general overview of the theory, and then specifically how it applies to the current research question by informing or providing the framework. If these two concepts remain the focus, then the chances of overloading the reader with too much information is greatly reduced.

There are two directions that the theory section can take once an overview of why the theory pertains to the current research topic has been discussed. The first possible direction is to show why the theory that has been used in previous studies needs to continue to be used in the same fashion. Another option is how and why this theory is a productive way to approach the current topic and research question. The second possible direction is to argue why a new theory should be used and the shortcomings of other theories. If the latter direction is chosen, arguments are made best if they are done so simultaneously. The primary way of ensuring this is if one gives strong support for one particular theory, then this will simultaneously weaken the opposing view.

Funneling Idea

As has been alluded to throughout this discussion, it is best to think of the literature review collectively as a funnel that starts out as a big opening and travels to a much narrower, finite end. In essence, this means that the literature review needs to go from broad to specific. The broad beginning needs to open with a general research question, and then each theme/subtopic needs to naturally narrow the focus to a specific research question that will be addressed in the present study. After beginning the literature review by introducing the overall general idea, briefly discuss why the topic is important and why more research needs to be conducted. The introduction also needs to include a preview of each dimension of the topic that will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

After the introduction, each theme/subtopic needs to be placed in a sequential order that makes logical sense. This sequential order will vary from study to study, but it will need to assist in narrowing the focus purely by the themes or headings used. A helpful way of determining if a logical sequential order has been achieved is to examine the outline of themes/subtopics to see if these headings alone lead to the desired focus of the current research topic. If the order and flow of the themes/subtopics goes from broad to narrow with the desired outcome, then a correct order has been achieved. If not, then experiment with reordering some of the concepts, or perhaps return to the prior literature to see if there is a theme that was overlooked, or a logical order that others have used and could be replicated. This will help ensure that a key piece of information that will distract the reader if not discussed will be included. Next, introduce the concept, briefly point out the relevance of the concept, and discuss what is known about it. Each theme or subsection needs to be ended by connecting it to the topic immediately following the current concept. It is best to think of this as welding the pieces of a stairway together. Each weld needs to be as smooth as possible so that someone later examining the finished product cannot identify weaknesses in connection that may lead the stairway/discussion to collapse. Also, it is vital that these topics are placed in a logical order to both convey to the readers the intended argument and to demonstrate a firm understanding of prior literature to the readers. The "funneling concept" will assist in forming the literature review and making a coherent argument throughout the entire work.

What is the Appropriate Way to End a Literature Review?

The end of the literature review serves as the bridge to the current study. Therefore, it must be a clear and concise summary of what was present in the literature review without getting bogged down with the extensive and too-specific-to-be-useful details. There needs to be a delicate balance between the primary findings/methodology of prior studies and demonstrating the need

for the continued study of a certain research topic or perhaps a new way of methodology.

Up until this point, the argument of what the present study is examining has been demonstrated in providing the weaknesses or gaps in findings or the strengths/shortcomings of the methodology of prior research. However, it is at this point where the weaknesses in findings or the methodology of prior research are explicitly stated. Think of this as a criminal prosecutor spending several days describing to a jury that an individual is guilty of a crime. The prosecutor may have had several days to present their belief in the guilt of the individual to the jury (and do so by introducing then discussion/detailing individual pieces of evidence), but then at the end (in the closing argument) they need to summarize their argument and show the need for a particular outcome (such as a guilty verdict) in a limited amount of time so as to drive home this point to jurors. Readers are like the jurors in this example. They need to be able to walk away from the literature review by understanding what the topic is, all of the relevant literature on the topic, any weaknesses in prior findings/methodology, and what this study is going to contribute to the further understanding of this topic.

If the above steps are followed, organizing and writing a literature review will become a more natural process with practice. Writing a literature review may never become easy because of the unique challenges that face each topic. However, following the steps, processes, and organization discussed above will help throughout the entire process of ensuring what the focus of current topic may be, and what types of necessary information to include. In addition, knowing how to adequately write a literature review will greatly assist in understanding and synthesizing vast amounts of information in addition to being able to more clearly recognize arguments being made in readings across all disciplines. Learning how to write a literature review greatly assists in the learning process by being able to recognize the structure of others' writings that may have been less apparent beforehand. The importance of understanding, both as a researcher and as a reader of a research study, what is already known about a topic is primary to doing high quality and useful research. As Boote and Beile (2005, p. 3) explain it: "A substantive, thorough, sophisticated literature review is a precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research." Therefore, learning how to write a high quality literature review is an invaluable tool for both the writing process and the learning process.

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