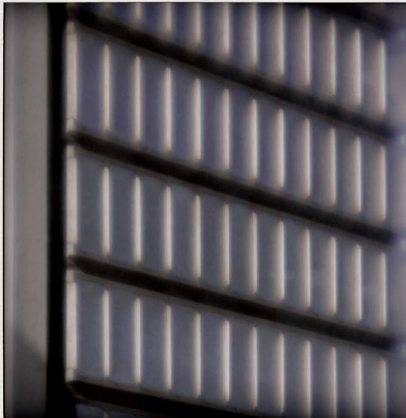
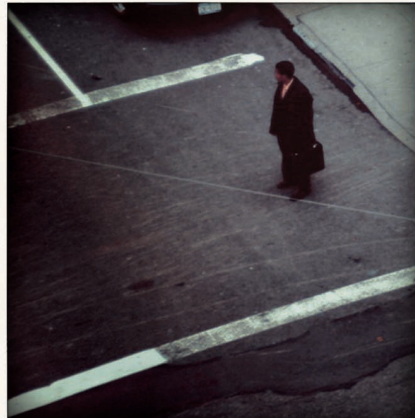


Critical Perspectives on the European Mediasphere



edited by
Ilija Tomanić Trivunđža
Nico Carpentier
Hannu Nieminen



Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt
Richard Kilborn
Tobias Olsson
Ebba Sundin

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The Importance of Literature Review in Research Design

Burcu Sümer

Well begun is half done.
(Aristotle, quoting a proverb)

Conducting doctoral research is, almost everywhere in Europe, becoming increasingly associated with obtaining a 'degree' and less with pursuing one's academic endeavours. Doctoral students, obliged to complete their studies in three to four years on average, now have less time to reflect on the 'why' questions of social inquiry and are under greater pressure to deal with the 'how' questions regarding their individual research projects. It is, therefore, no surprise that when students field questions about their research projects, they feel more comfortable with the question of 'what do you do?' rather than 'what is your topic?' The difference between these two questions is vital since, for students who rush into actual field research very quickly, due to the time constraints of submission, the first question is a secure one, implying an empiric dimension that one can describe one way or the other. The latter, however, requires a positioning in the vast ontological and epistemological terrains of social inquiry and always has the potential to trigger more (self-)reflexive questions that can cause unwelcome delays in the research calendar.

Although a fresh doctoral student may be allowed to waffle around his/her topic in the early stages of research, within the doctoral dissertation it is the 'literature review' part where s/he needs to introduce, discuss and justify their research topic in a very convincing manner. Writing a good literature review for a doctoral dissertation is, in fact, a craft, and, despite its importance, it is very interesting that mastering this craft is very rarely taught as part of doctoral training programmes. Doctoral students lose months if not years trying to develop a literature review within which to situate their research, by piling up numerous quotations from one publication or another. Consequently – and not surprisingly – literature reviews are very often criticised by examiners for being 'poorly written',

'not adequately conceptualised', 'not comprehensive enough' or even for being 'not adequate at all'.

The very first step to be completed, before dwelling on the literature of a research topic, is to define the research question(s). Again, developing analytically adequate and operational research questions is not an easy task and, in most cases, requires the guidance of the director of studies/supervisor. Nevertheless, it is crucial as the basic component of an academic inquiry is a question; it is a *sine qua non* of research design. The way we formulate our research questions shapes our method of reasoning, which in return guides us in relating the existing literature in a field to our own research agenda.

There are, broadly speaking, two methods or approaches of reasoning: deductive and inductive (see Bryman, 2008; Trochim, 2006). Applied to academic research, deductive reasoning is an approach where the researcher begins developing a research interest/topic after encountering a theory or a method. Research questions are then shaped in order to analyse social phenomena in the light of that particular theory or by employing that particular method. In media studies, for instance, studies of content, discourse or policy analyses can be regarded as such. In deductive research designs, the way the researcher deals with the literature is more direct and clearly defined. On the other hand, inductive reasoning can be seen as a type of theory-building where the researcher aims to develop a way to understand the disorderly world of social phenomena by introducing and analysing its dis/similarities, dis/continuities, ir/regularities. In this kind of research design, the way the researcher engages with literature is more eclectic, inter-disciplinary and open-ended and therefore in most cases requires the researcher to move in between different but relevant concepts and theories used in various fields of social inquiry. Then again, it is also important to note that these broad categories of research design are not mutually exclusive or incompatible with one another. There is nothing wrong with combining two approaches in one single study, since conducting research is, in fact, a circular practice. Even for research based on deductive reasoning, the researcher is expected to reflect on the initial theory and methods by suggesting a further research agenda in the conclusions of the research. Nevertheless, knowing which approach one's initial research interest is closer to will always be of great help in the early stages of designing a research strategy. This is particularly important for two types of doctoral students: those who become furious when they start reading the literature, thinking that 'everything has been written, said and

done', and those who are very sure of themselves, arguing that 'nothing has been written, said and done'. It is very likely, if not certain, that both types of doctoral students are actually looking in the wrong places with false motives.

1. WHAT IS A LITERATURE REVIEW AND WHAT IS ITS PURPOSE?

There are numerous definitions of literature reviews. Going through these definitions, however, one can easily see that the difference between them is actually a matter of degree, not substance. Different definitions offer different combinations of important elements that a good literature review must contain. One good definition is offered by Noter and Cole (2010: 3), who suggest that literature review "is a coherent, integrated, narrative, interpretive criticism that critiques the status of knowledge of a carefully defined topic of the selected relevant existing literature". The keyword in this definition is 'criticism', since a literature review is neither a list nor a summary of concepts, methods and theories covered in different scholarly publications. The initial purpose of a literature review is to help the researcher develop a conceptual and theoretical framework that serves many purposes (as listed below). This is actually why, in the guidelines of many postgraduate programmes, this section of the dissertation is also referred to as the 'conceptual' or 'theoretical framework'. Some scholars even consider it "an important research method" (Baumeister and Leary, 1997: 311). Therefore, "[t]he literature review must be relevant, appropriate and useful to your research problem" (Noter and Cole, 2010: 3).

Although drafting a well-developed and well-argued literature review for a dissertation takes time and requires the researcher to constantly revisit what s/he has written, having one that you are confident with has numerous advantages. Some of the key purposes a literature review serves are:

- to show the researcher's familiarity with the existing body of knowledge in a particular field of research
- to show the researcher's ability to engage critically with the existing body of knowledge in a particular field of research
- to paradigmatically ground the research
- to contribute to theoretical development in a particular field of research
- to develop an argumentation on the importance of the proposed research so that the researcher does not reinvent the wheel but actually has the potential to make an original contribution to the field

- to frame the research questions developed and methodologies used
- to develop a theoretical/conceptual foundation for the proposed research, creating an interpretive framework for the research
- to introduce a theoretical/conceptual map to analyse and provide meaning to the collected data

Clearly, for PhD research based on empirical analysis, the literature review serves first and foremost as a theoretical framework for grounding the analysis. Put differently, its function is defined on a more operational level. For PhD research that is more theoretically oriented, however, the literature review is crucial for introducing an eclectic conceptual map through which the disciplinary contexts, as well as the boundaries of the key concepts and theories used in research, are analytically discussed. Without a strongly argued and logically presented conceptual map, a theoretically oriented PhD research may have to face the inevitable consequences of being labelled as 'mumbo-jumbo'.

2. WHERE AND HOW TO BEGIN?

Adolphus (2009: n/p) very neatly suggests that "[c]arrying a literature review should be both serendipitous and systematic". Reviewing the literature for a PhD dissertation is actually very valuable one, and is the only time a researcher can fully and uninterruptedly concentrate on reading on one particular research interest day and night. Once the PhD is finished, for those who will continue their academic careers as staff members at academic institutions, it is unlikely that they will find enough time to isolate themselves from the heavy workload of teaching and administrative duties to read 50 consecutive pages uninterrupted. Therefore, chasing after keywords from one database to the other, moving between references in different academic sources and jumping from articles to books are all acceptable during the literature review phase of doctoral study. However, all of these should be done systematically, in order to avoid wasting time or suffering from writer's block. Many doctoral students struggle to embark on writing up their literature reviews, citing the unconvincing argument that they 'haven't read enough'. At this point, the importance of having (reasonably) well-formulated research questions before reviewing the literature comes to the fore. Operational research questions enable the researcher to come up with the correct keywords to review in the available literature. Wasting time reading irrelevant sources is less likely to happen if keywords have been well chosen.

As noted earlier, the key purpose of the literature review is to help the researcher contextualise his/her study within the body of knowledge that has been produced so far on that particular topic of interest. Therefore, while dealing with different sources, employing a target-oriented reading by directing a set of key critical questions to the scholarly source will enable you to adequately map out the disciplinary borders of the field in which you want to situate your own study. Some of these questions are listed below. One thing that will help most, while writing the literature review, is keeping a well-organised record of your reading. Considering that reviewing literature for a doctoral study requires extensive reading of academic and intellectual sources over a relatively long period of time, effective note-taking is invaluable to developing a good literature review. The literature review sections are very often criticised for not being critical enough and for being little more than a list of summaries of the sources used (Steane, 2004). One good way to avoid this is to get into the practice of effective note-taking from the start, which will gradually help the researcher engage critically with the literature. Therefore, the questions below should not only be kept in mind but also incorporated into the reading notes:

- What is already known on this topic?
- What are the relevant concepts and theories?
- In which paradigm(s) is it situated?
- What research methods/strategies have been used so far?
- What are the initial findings? Are there any significant inconsistencies?
- Are there any controversies? Are these controversies significant?
- *Are there any unanswered questions?*
- *Are there any unasked but still relevant questions?*

The last two questions are particularly important, since they help the researcher to identify their contribution to knowledge by conducting the doctoral research they proposed. Continuous reflection on these questions will help the researcher reformulate his/her initial questions.

Then again, one major difficulty for doctoral students is prioritising between sources. Trying to include everything in a literature review or relying on a limited number of sources that only serve to explain your topic are both misguided. A literature review should be comprehensive and selective at the same time. Applying the questions below to every piece of literature is important in deciding what is relevant, and will also be useful in prioritising between a large number of sources:

- Does it contribute to a wider understanding of the topic/area/problem, as captured in the research question(s)?
- What is its impact on the literature?
- Does it contribute to my understanding of the problem?
- Does it offer a clear argumentation or an accurate analysis?
- Is it biased, outdated, rhetorical?
- Is it published or unpublished?

3. HOW TO STRUCTURE A LITERATURE REVIEW

Much of the current debate on different types of literature reviews revolves around two types of review: *systematic* vs. *narrative*. The systematic review approach originates from the field of evidence-based health care, and adopts explicit procedures documenting the selection criteria for the literature in order to provide an 'unbiased' and 'consistent' knowledge base (see Bryman, 2008; Denyer and Tranfield, 2009). Within systematic reviews, *meta-analysis* is an approach used for reviewing quantitative studies, whereas *meta-ethnography* is used for synthesising qualitative studies. The systematic reviewers' emphasis on reliability and transparency in approaching literature has also attracted the attention of practitioners of social research, particularly of social policy, but narrative review is still the dominant approach in wider areas of social inquiry. The difference between the two approaches is, in fact, a question of epistemology and, given the diversity of methodologies used in social research, it is understandable that narrative review continues to be the most preferred approach.

There are different ways to structure a narrative literature review, and, very broadly speaking, it can be either organised historically, methodologically or conceptually. It all depends on the initial research design and the key research questions, but one thing to remember always is that it is not a linear piece of writing. A good literature review is, in fact, an intelligently organised puzzle based on comparing and contrasting theories, concepts and methods. A selection of common mistakes in literature reviews identified by various scholars (cf. Baumeister and Leary, 1997; Randolph, 2009; Muirhead, 2004) is very useful for understanding how a literature review should be organised:

Lack of integration: This is one of the most common mistakes identified by examiners in PhD dissertations. A literature review is not a descriptive account of a selection of concepts, theories or studies. Without

introducing the reader at an early stage to what this review is about, by providing an integrative theoretical map of the key concepts and debates, it is very likely that the reader will be lost in this sea of citations and references. This integrative map is also crucial to identifying the researcher's contribution to theory in this review, and in relation to the particular research study. This map should be further developed in the review while linking, comparing and contrasting studies with one another. The review should make explicit why particular studies, concepts, theories and paradigms have been considered and not others, by continuously explaining the key theoretical or conceptual points of integration.

Inadequate coverage and bias towards selection: Two particularly common confusions when comparing and contrasting different studies in a literature review is how much to include and how much detail to present. Then again, inadequacy of coverage is not only a matter of quantity, but also of quality and substance. One general mistake is to focus on the results of the research presented in various studies without giving any methodological information on the conditions of the evidence behind the results cited. To give an example, one study may conclude that domestic violence is linked to levels of education, but if this study is to be cited then the review should also incorporate information on the research design that led to this conclusion in that particular study. This is one good way not to mix evidence with assertion (Baumeister and Leary, 1997: 318-319). Bias towards selection occurs when the review is made up only of studies supporting the researcher's standpoint or theories, and the concepts or studies selected are only discussed in terms of their strengths, not weaknesses. A neat discussion of the weaknesses of the studies in the field is actually a very good way to argue about the importance of your own research.

Misuse of the literature: There are two general misuses of literature, inevitably leading to a failure to grasp the context and the core of the cited literature. The first type of misuse usually happens when 'big' names such as Marx, Freud, Habermas etc. are cited from secondary sources. It is true that big names might often be very difficult for doctoral students to understand in the early stages of their academic lives and they find it easy to apply secondary literature written about these big names to understand their works. However, the problem in relying on secondary sources is that if you are not knowledgeable about the primary source covered in the study you cite, or where you have not read enough of the secondary literature to identify the disciplinary borders of the debate on the primary source, then there is no way that you can be sure whether the study you cite in your review actually gives a correct account of the primary source. In a similar vein, the second type of misuse of lit-

erature occurs when citations of quotes from other studies are included in a literature review without checking the accuracy of the citation. The fact that a scholar has cited a quote from another study does not necessarily mean that s/he remains loyal to the conceptual and theoretical context of that phrase within the original study. Therefore, in both cases, checking but also properly reading the original source – as long as you can access it – is always the safer route to follow.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is clear that writing a good literature review is a craft, but then again it is always comforting to know that it does not require talent. It matures from practice and from continuous reflection on that practice. The key points covered in this article are based on criticisms directed by examiners and journal editors. In an ideal academic world of social inquiry, however, conducting doctoral research is about understanding the way things are in life by asking intelligent questions about it. One way or the other, pursuing a doctoral study means placing a brick in the wall of the knowledge of life. The value of your contribution to this wall very much depends on how accurately you define that wall and your contribution to its development. On an operational level, the literature review section of the PhD dissertation is the exact place to demonstrate why your definitions, theories, concepts, paradigms and overall contribution matter. While doing that, you should never forget: “*Vox audita perit, littera scripta manet*”¹.

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1 “A heard voice perishes, but the written word remains” (English translation of the Latin proverb)

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