

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Introduction

A sound literature review is an extremely important component of many types of papers written in sociology. Professional journals in sociology and in other disciplines typically require authors to include a literature review in articles that are submitted for consideration for publication. Students are asked to include a literature review in most honors projects and independent studies and in a variety of papers and assignments in other courses. Writing a properly structured literature review is a very important skill in sociology.

A literature review (also expressed as “a review of the literature”) is an overview of previous research on the author’s topic or on an important aspect of the author’s topic. It identifies and describes and sometimes analyzes related research that has already been done and summarizes the state of knowledge about the topic. To best understand the role of a literature review, consider its place in the research process and in the research paper.

The research process often begins with a question that the researcher would like to answer. In order to identify what other research has addressed this question and to find out what is already known about it, the researcher will conduct a literature review. This entails examining scholarly books and journal articles, and sometimes additional resources such as conference proceedings and dissertations, to learn about previous research related to the question. Researchers want to be able to identify what is already known about the question and to build upon existing knowledge. Familiarity with previous research also helps researchers design their own study. Once this literature review foundation is developed, a researcher decides how she or he will study the subject, designs a research method or methods, collects and analyzes the data, and reflects on what has been learned.

Research papers follow this same general outline as they begin with an introduction and identification of a research question, present the literature review, identify and explain the theory and hypotheses guiding the research, describe the research methods, present the results, and discuss the findings of the research.

The Objectives of a Literature Review

Authors should try to accomplish the following four important objectives in preparing a literature review:

1. The review should provide a thorough overview of previous research on the topic. This should be a helpful review for readers who are already familiar with the topic and an essential background for readers who are new to the topic. The review should provide a clear sense about how the author’s

current research fits into the broader, sociological understanding of the topic. When the reader completes reading of the literature review, she or he should be able to say, "I now know what previous research has learned about this topic."

2. The review should contain references to important previous studies related to the research question that are found in high quality sources such as scholarly books and journals. A good literature review conveys to readers that the author has been conscientious in examining previous research and that the author's research builds on what is already known. In this process, highly interested readers are also provided with a set of references that they may wish to read themselves.
3. The review should be succinct and well-organized. Most scholarly journals stipulate a maximum length for papers submitted for publication, and often this is only about 20 pages. After all of the work that has gone into a paper, authors typically feel they could write at least twice that much. Thus, every page is precious, and authors must learn how to write succinctly. A typical literature review is only about 3, 4, or 5 of the 20 pages, and it must contain a lot of information. Therefore, it is necessary and helpful to learn how to do it succinctly.

Many authors like to begin with a short "Introduction" section that identifies the general topic and its importance. This is followed by the "Literature Review" section that provides the overview of previous research and explains what has and what has not already been learned. Much of the focus of the literature review is on previous research related to the dependent variable. This includes use of sociological theories to explain the dependent variable. It may also be appropriate to focus on research related to the independent variables. Notice how the examples below illustrate this.

4. The review should follow generally established stylistic guidelines. This conveys to readers that the author is familiar with scholarly publication style, and that can add legitimacy to the author's work. Plus, when the typical style is used, it is easier for readers to immediately follow the paper's organization.

Examples of Proper Literature Reviews

Example #1: A Brief Section of a Literature Review (Lin and Dembo 2008)

The first example presented is from a research article (Lin and Dembo 2008:35) that sought to explain why some juveniles use illegal drugs and others do not. One of the theories being used by the authors is social control theory. The following section is part of the literature review that discusses previous research findings on the role of this theory in predicting juvenile drug use.

Hirschi's (1969) social control theory argued that adolescents who had no strong bond to conventional social institutions were more likely to commit delinquency. Many empirical studies that follow Hirschi's theory found general support that juveniles who have strong social bonds are engaged in fewer delinquent acts (Agnew 1985; Costello and Vowell 1999; Erickson, Crosboe, and Dornbush 2000; Hindelang 1973; Hirschi 1969; Junger-Tas 1992; Sampson and Laub 1993; Thornberry et al. 1991). Some studies that specially employed social control theory to explain juvenile drug use have also found support for this theory (Ellickson et al. 1999; Krohn et al. 1983; Marcos et al. 1986; Wiatrowski, Griswold, and Roberts 1981). By reviewing these studies, one can find that during the adolescent period (12-17), family and school play influential roles in influencing youngsters' behavior. Whereas a defective family bond increases the probability of youthful drug use or juvenile delinquency (Denton and Kampfe 1994; Wells and Rankin 1991; Rankin and Kern 1994; Radosevich et al. 1980), students who have a weak school bond also have a higher risk of drug use (Ahlgren et al. 1982; Bauman 1984; Radosevich et al. 1980; Tec 1972).

Notice especially the following: (1) the thorough overview of previous research, (2) the large number of previous research studies referenced, (3) the succinct and well-organized writing style, and (4) the manner in which previous studies are cited.

Also note the following formatting guidelines:

- 1) If name of author(s) is in the text, put DATE OF PUBLICATION in parentheses.
- 2) If one author, use NAME and DATE OF PUBLICATION (and no punctuation between them).
- 3) If two authors, use NAME and NAME and DATE OF PUBLICATION.
- 4) If three authors, use NAME, NAME, and NAME and DATE OF PUBLICATION.
- 5) If four or more authors, use NAME et al. and DATE OF PUBLICATION.
- 6) If two or more citations are listed together, order them alphabetically by first author's last name.

Example #2: A Brief Section of a Literature Review (Rogoeczi 2008)

The second example is from a research article (Rogoeczi 2008) that examines whether living in crowded conditions has the same or a different effect on women and men. The following section is part of the literature review that discusses previous research findings on the effect of lack of space in a room on aggressive actions by women and men. Note that the section comments on the fact that not all previous research is consistent. This sometimes is the case and is important to note.

Experimental research varying room size reveals a relatively consistent pattern of gender differences, with more aggressive responses to limited space found among males than those observed among women (Baum and Koman 1976; Epstein and Karlin 1975; Freedman et al. 1972; Mackintosh, Saegert, and West 1975; Stokols et al. 1973). Studies examining the effects of density on children also report sex differences in response to density, with boys displaying heightened aggression (Loo 1972, 1978). Research on gender differences in withdrawal has produced more mixed findings (e.g., Loo 1978). Still other research finds no evidence of sex differences in discomfort as a result of crowding (Aiello, Epstein, and Karlin 1975; Baum and Valins 1977) or in the impact of crowding (Evans et al. 2000). Several longitudinal studies of the impact of household crowding on psychological distress among college students reveal no differential effect by gender (Evans and Lepore 1993; Lepore, Evans, and Schneider 1991). However Karlin, Epstein, and Aiello (1978) report more physical and psychological effects among crowded women than men.

Once again, notice the following: (1) the thorough overview of previous research, (2) the large number of previous research studies referenced, (3) the succinct and well-organized writing style, and (4) the manner in which previous studies are cited.

Example #3: An Extended Section of a Literature Review (Durkin, Wolfe, and Clark 2005).

As an example of an extended section of a literature review, an article by Keith Durkin, Timothy Wolfe, and Gregory Clark (2005: 256-261) in *Sociological Spectrum* is used. The research examines the ability of social learning theory to explain binge drinking by college students. Tim Wolfe is chair of the sociology department at Mount Saint Mary's University and a sociology graduate of Roanoke College.

Introduction

Research Purpose

The abuse of alcohol by college students has been the focus of considerable concern for several decades. However, one specific pattern of alcohol consumption, known as binge drinking, has recently received a tremendous amount of attention from the media, college personnel, healthcare professionals and researchers in the behavioral sciences. Binge drinking involves the consumption of large quantities of alcohol in a single drinking episode. A number of researchers have operationally defined binge drinking as the consumption of five or more alcoholic drinks in a single setting (Alva 1998; Borsari and Carey 1999; Haines and Spear 1996; Hensley 2001; Ichiyama and Kruse 1998; Jones et al.

2001; Meilman, Leichter, and Presley 1999; Nezlek, Pilkington, and Bilbro 1994; Page, Scanlan, and Gilbert 1999; Shulenberg et al. 1996). Research has indicated that this behavior is a prevalent phenomenon on college campuses nationwide. For instance, a 1993 survey of 17,592 students from 140 colleges and universities, which was conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health, found that 44% of students reported they had engaged in binge drinking during the previous two weeks (Weschler et al. 1994). Subsequent studies conducted in 1997, 1999, and 2001 produced nearly identical results (Weschler et al. 2002).

There is a growing consensus that binge drinking constitutes a very serious threat to the well being of many of today's college students. In fact, binge drinking has been characterized as the foremost public health hazard facing college students (Weschler et al. 1995). Research has indicated that compared to other college students, binge drinkers are more likely to experience negative consequences as a result of consuming alcoholic beverages. These include blackouts, hangovers, missing class because of drinking, falling behind in their studies, doing something that they later regretted, arguing with friends, getting involved in physical fights, and getting into trouble with the police (Weschler et al. 1994; Weschler et al. 2000). The most recent research suggests that many of these aforementioned negative consequences are on the rise nationally (Weschler et al. 2002). Binge drinking is also related to engaging in high-risk sexual behaviors, thus putting these students in danger of contracting sexually transmitted diseases or having an unplanned pregnancy (Ichiyama and Kruse 1998; Meilman 1993; Smith and Brown 1998). Moreover, recent research has found that students who report getting drunk frequently have significantly higher odds of being victims of assault than their peers (Hensley 2001; Mustaine and Tewsbury 2000). Furthermore, it is estimated that more than half of the young adults who binge drink on a daily basis exhibit indicators of alcohol abuse or dependency (Shulenberg et al. 1996). Finally, the tragic alcohol-related deaths of students at several colleges and universities highlight the potentially fatal consequences of this activity (Jones et al. 2001; Vicary and Karshin 2002).

Research has further revealed that the negative consequences of binge drinking are not limited to the students who participate in this behavior. This activity also has an adverse impact on other members of the university community. The concepts of "secondary binge effects" (Weschler et al. 1994; Weschler et al. 1995) and "secondhand effects" (Weschler et al. 2002) have emerged in the literature to describe the problems that are the direct result of other students' binge drinking. Some of these secondary binge effects include being verbally insulted or abused, being physically assaulted, having one's property damaged, experiencing unwelcome sexual advances, and having sleep or studying disturbed because of the conduct of intoxicated students. The recent alcohol-related riots on a number of campuses and neighboring communities are also examples of these secondary consequences (Vicary and Karshin 2002). Neighbors living near campuses frequently report a lower quality of life as a result of student binge drinking because of noise disturbances, litter, drunkenness, vandalism, vomiting, and urination (Weschler 2002).

Although a number of recent studies have sought to identify factors that are associated with binge drinking by college students (Alva 1998; Ichiyama and Kruse 1998; Page et al. 1999; Turrisi 1999; Weschler, et al. 1995), research that applies the various sociological perspectives, particularly theories of deviant behavior to this phenomenon is particularly limited. For instance, Durkin, Wolfe, and Clark (1999) applied social bond theory to the binge drinking behavior of undergraduate students at one private college. Also, Workman (2001) conducted an ethnographic study at one university to examine the social

construction and communication of norms about excessive drinking among fraternity members. The relative absence of sociological research on binge drinking is an extremely significant oversight. Given the fact that sociological theories of deviance typically have a strong explanatory value, the current undertaking can make an important contribution to understanding this problematic behavior. The purpose of the current undertaking is to apply one of the leading sociological explanations of deviant behavior, social learning theory (Akers 1985, 2000), to binge drinking by college students.

Once again, notice the following: (1) the thorough overview of previous research, (2) the large number of previous research studies referenced, (3) the succinct and well-organized writing style, and (4) the manner in which previous studies are cited. In addition, notice how the authors use the last paragraph to explain the need for a sociological study of binge drinking.

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