

SECOND EDITION

METHODOLOGICAL THINKING

BASIC PRINCIPLES OF SOCIAL RESEARCH DESIGN



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Literature Reviews

I will start this chapter with what journalists call a *grabber*, a sentence written in order to gain your attention: The majority of time needed to design research is spent in finding, reading, and summarizing what already is known about the topic to be studied. If you skip too quickly over this design work, your research will not be as good as it could have been; it might even turn out to be useless, if all you do is rediscover what already is known. Understanding how literature reviews are done is critical to developing good research. Understanding why and how literature reviews are done also is important when you are evaluating the work of others because you will need to evaluate the appropriateness and completeness of their reviews. So, whether you are reading this book to learn how to design research or how to evaluate it, literature reviews are important. I will start with defining the meaning of the concept called *the literature*.

DEFINING *THE LITERATURE* ●

There are many variations in how, specifically, researchers define the meaning of what is called *the literature*, or the *existing literature*. Here I will take a very traditional, conservative approach: *The literature* is shorthand for the *scholarly literature*. In the abstract, the scholarly literature contains all the scholarly theory and research; it contains everything that scholars know about the world. In the concrete, the scholarly literature has three general characteristics. First, it contains research and theory that primarily has been written by and for

members of *scholarly communities*, which are groups of people who share disciplinary orientations or substantive interests. There are scholarly communities of sociologists, criminologists, gerontologists, and so on; there are scholarly communities of people interested in particular topics such as identity, American history, gender, crime and law, and so on. Second, the scholarly literature appears in specific places: It is in books and journal articles whose assumed audiences are members of the scholarly communities concerned with the topics in those books and journals. Third, works in the scholarly literature have gone through the process of *scholarly review* where manuscripts submitted for possible publication are evaluated by members of relevant scholarly communities. Sociologists respected for their knowledge of race/ethnicity review manuscripts on those topics, social workers with particular expertise in family dynamics review manuscripts on those topics, and so on. In this way, respected members of particular scholarly communities control what will—and what will not—become a part of the scholarly literature.

Communities of scholars control the contents of the scholarly literature.

This description of what is in the literature simultaneously defines what is *not*: Excluded is work appearing in mass media outlets of all types (magazines, newspapers, broadcasts) and on Internet sites sponsored by individuals or corporate, political, or social activist organizations. Most certainly, some of the research reported in these places might be excellent. Indeed, its quality might be as high as—or even higher than—research reported in scholarly outlets. Yet regardless, mass media and Internet sites (including Wikipedia and Ask.com) do *not* count as *the literature* because the contents of information in these places is not controlled by communities of scholars.

The definition I just offered of *the literature* is elitist, because it is limited to knowledge evaluated as important by people with scholarly reputations, something granted by other members of the relevant professional community. What this means is that insiders to scholarly communities control what is evaluated as “good enough” to become a part of the knowledge base supported by that community. This leads to some logical reasons to criticize the process leading to publication in such places: Members of scholarly communities can become isolated from concerns of people outside these communities; community members can be biased and too easily accept work that reflects these biases

rather than work reflecting truly quality research. For these and other reasons, the system of scholarly review ensures neither that what makes it into the literature is excellent nor that what is excluded is inferior. Is high-quality research necessarily produced by people who are respected members of scholarly communities? No. Is the process of scholarly review or location in a respectable academic journal a guarantee that the work is high quality? No. This leads to a general lesson:

Take the *critical/skeptical stance* on everything you read. Do not assume that academic credentials or respectable publication sites guarantee high-quality research.

If you are thinking critically at this moment, you might wonder why you should continue reading this chapter. If *the literature* does not necessarily contain the truth, then what good is it? That is an honest question and I will offer an honest answer: The scholarly review process certainly is imperfect. It is not hard to find instances of academic journals declining to publish research of obvious high quality or of publishing research of obvious low quality. Yet take a moment to think critically about the general issue: If the process of publication is not controlled by members of scholarly communities then who or what should have the power to determine what counts as knowledge? The vast expanse of the Internet offers one alternative: Do not have any filters, let ideas battle it out, and let audience members decide what is truth and what is fiction. Given what we know about human tendencies to too easily accept what confirms our preexisting beliefs and too easily reject what challenges them, knowledge in this model is based on personal biases that continually reinforce themselves. What I am arguing is that, however imperfect in practice, scholarly review, *on the average*, is better than the alternatives in filtering out low-quality research.

With this basic definition of *the literature*, I will move on to why it is important to take the time to locate, read, and think about it when you are designing research.

EXISTING KNOWLEDGE AS TOOLS FOR RESEARCH DESIGN ●

A major tool of detectives is their personal experiences: Some new mysteries remind them of mysteries they already solved. Their experiences can be clues to solving new mysteries. The existing literature

offers social researchers the same kind of tool: Researchers designing new research can read articles to learn what already is known about the proposed research topic, to see what others have done, and what others believe needs to be done. I would argue that although the work of reviewing the existing literature can be very time consuming, this work actually *saves* more time than it *takes*.

Previous Studies Define What New Research Is Needed

Research is the process of asking and answering questions about social life, so it only makes sense to start the research process by asking what already is known about the topic. If you are designing research, be ready for the possibility that once you start reading, you will find your original question already has been answered. This makes sense, because there is a long history of research on the mysteries of social life, so many of the most obvious questions—What causes crime? What are gendered expectations for women and for men?—have received a great deal of attention.

Learning what *is* known simultaneously tells us what *is not* known. While in the last chapter I talked about how research mandates can be to answer questions with practical consequences, research in academia most often has a theoretical mandate: Research is important because it extends our knowledge about the world.

Example 4.1: In “From Foster Care to College,” we learn that “extensive research on student achievement” accomplished by others forms the “conceptual frameworks that guided the study’s design and development” (lines 182–184). In addition to the quite practical mandate of learning what helps and hinders foster children’s educational attainment, the researcher tells us the study added to our knowledge base: It extended those previous models by adding “family-level and internal success strengths” (lines 186–187) as well as included barriers unique to foster care (lines 188–192).

Example 4.2: We need the research reported in “Mean Girls?” because “research examining the effects of media exposure demonstrates that media consumption has a measureable influence on people’s perception of the real world...because past research additionally indicates that watching televised gender portrayals has an effect on individuals’ real-world gender-based attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (lines 1–7). This is what is known. The research in “Mean Girls?” is needed because of what is not known: “Despite the popularity of teen movies, the influence of such films on emerging adults has not been examined” (line 8).

Previous Studies Offer Guidelines for Research Design

The existing literature also can offer important practical information that can help in the work of designing research. How have other researchers defined the topic? What kinds of data generation techniques have others used? Have others designed survey or interview questions that are relevant to the research you are developing? As you read what others have written, jot down details of what they did that might be useful in planning your own study. With proper citation, of course, it is acceptable—indeed, it is preferable—to use what others have done. Researchers form a community; research is about building knowledge. The more you can draw from the successes (and failures) of others, the better. Why rediscover the wheel?

Example 4.3: The researcher in “Digital Identity Divide” tells us that another researcher’s “exemplary examination into the mathematics identities of African American students provides guidance in developing an analytical conception of a technology identity” (lines 46–47).

Example 4.4: We learn by reading “Changes in Adult Attachment Styles” that the Relationship Questionnaire (RQ) is one of the “most widely used self-report measures of adult attachment” (lines 35–36). If you were reading this article to prepare for research, it would be good to find this questionnaire because it might be exactly what you need.

The work of reviewing the existing literature is important in the early stages of research design because it can help researchers ground their proposed topic in what already is known, offer mandates for why the topic is important to examine, and give insights into what already has been developed by others. The time spent reviewing how others have approached your research topic will save you considerable time by providing measurements (Chapter 5) and data generation techniques (Chapter 6).

Previous Studies Offer Models for Writing About Social Research Design

The best way to learn how to write about the research you are doing is to read research that has been published. In addition to reading for *content*, read articles for their *form*. As you are reading articles, you will find some that seem especially appealing. Study these articles. How are they put together? What do you like about them? You may

find that the particular content of the research in such article is not what you need for the research you are designing, yet the article might be very beneficial if you can use it as a model for organizing and writing about your own research design.

● DEFINING THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

Typically the hardest job in designing research is to decide precisely what should be included, and what should be excluded, in the literature review. These always are difficult decisions and for good reason: People and social life are complex, and in very real ways, almost everything is related to everything else. Yet for two reasons, researchers must make decisions about how to “package” their research, which means what concepts to include and to emphasize, which to merely mention, and which to ignore. Packaging research is as much about what to exclude as it is about what to include. A very practical reason for this is because literature reviews must be done in a limited number of pages. Publishers define very strict page limits for print journals so editors must make trade-offs between the length of manuscripts and the number of manuscripts they accept. While e-journals do not have physical page limits, their length nonetheless is limited by the number of words readers are willing to read. The consequence of this is that researchers must decide how to limit their topic in order to adequately cover what already is known within available space.

The second reason why researchers must make decision about what to include and exclude is more complex and more important: Literature reviews are like GPS coordinates in that they give the location of the study in the scholarly literature. For researchers, the *process* of reviewing the literature answers critical questions: Why is the study needed? Where does it fit in the scholarly literature? What already is known about the proposed study topic? How do the proposed study questions fit with what already is known? For readers, the *product* of literature reviews shows where, in the huge expanse of knowledge, the current study is located. This leads to an important concept: Out of all that huge expanse of *the literature*, the literature review defines that part which directly pertains to the particular study. This is called the *relevant literature*.

What *is* the relevant literature? While new researchers often talk about their problems in “finding” it, it makes more sense to think in terms of problems “defining” it. That is, researchers decide what

is—and what is not—relevant to the research being developed and this requires drawing conceptual boundaries around the research.

The *relevant literature* is that part of the scholarly literature which defines appropriate conceptual boundaries around the research topic.

Conceptual boundaries are the GPS coordinates to locate the study in the scholarly literature. Begin with an image of the physical library: The general conceptual boundary identifies the row of shelves in which the study belongs; the specific boundary identifies the research in terms of a particular place on a particular shelf.

Defining General Conceptual Boundaries

General conceptual boundaries are the broad topics of social research. General concepts in the social sciences include those of gender, crime, identity, family, and education. When such general concepts are used as boundaries to situate a particular study, they define a broad relevant literature. Yet what they define will be too broad to be of much help in defining the relevant literature.

Example 4.5: Reviewing the literature typically begins with one or another web search engine (more about this in the next section). As an example, I used one search engine called Sociological Abstracts to find articles published in peer-reviewed journals after the year 2000 with the word *identity* in their title. This search yielded 10,021 articles. This is not helpful at all because I could not even read the titles of that many articles, much less read the articles.

Obviously, general concepts are too unspecific to direct research. There is so much already known about concepts such as identity, immigration, or gender that it would be not possible to either review the existing literature nor construct a firm foundation upon which to build research. Broad concepts must be narrowed.

Defining Specific Conceptual Boundaries

Defining relevant literatures primarily is about the specific boundaries that will be placed around concepts. In the most typical case, researchers interested in very broad topics must substantially narrow their focus.

Example 4.6: The concept of alcohol use, although meaningful, is too large to lead research. "Alcohol References on Undergraduate Males' Facebook Profiles" limits the concept to people of a particular gender (males), in a particular social position (student), at a particular level of education (college).

Example 4.7: "Bonds of Brotherhood" is about college students, racial discrimination, and emotion, all concepts that are very general and therefore incapable of leading research. These general concepts become useful when they are interrelated and focused: The research is about particular consequences of racial discrimination (feeling marginalized) felt by particular college students (Black males). This marginalization creates a need for these men to experience a particular emotion (brotherhood), which allows them to offer social support to one another although this defies the dominant cultural expectations that men should be emotionally inexpressive.

It can take considerable time to define the specific conceptual boundaries around a research question because this usually is the process of trial and error.

Example 4.8: A student interested in the experiences of African American student scholar-athletes assumed he would locate his research in the topic of race/ethnicity. Yet his first glance at the literature showed this would not be possible. The topic of race/ethnicity is too multidimensional and complex; there are vast numbers of research projects using many different theories. Search engines produced tens of thousands of articles so this was not helpful. He then decided to locate his research within the topic of sports, but that, too, proved to be too large and complicated and most of it was not relevant. These attempts led him to the important realization: He was most interested in that portion of the literature that was about race/ethnicity *and* students *and* sports.

If you are doing a literature review and locate an enormous number of articles it means you need to think about how to be *more specific* in defining your conceptual boundaries. Alternatively, you might not be able to locate anything that seems relevant. If this happens, it means you need to be *less specific* in defining your boundaries.

Example 4.9: One of my students was interested in the experiences of women who work at Hooters Restaurants. Strongly grounded in a critical, feminist perspective, she wanted to understand the problems facing

women who are expected to do the difficult physical work of waitressing while simultaneously acting and appearing as sexual objects. Her initial look into the literature was frustrating because she could not find any past research about Hooters. She had to expand her vision. One way was to stop thinking about Hooters as a *specific* place and begin thinking about it as a *type* of place. So, for example, Hooters is a restaurant, and there has been considerable research on the experiences of women waitresses. Hooters is also a place where a work requirement is displaying feminine characteristics, which is very similar to expectations for women who work in bars, and considerable research has looked at those kinds of jobs. By expanding her interest from a particular place (Hooters) to particular kinds of places (restaurants and bars), she found existing theories and research that placed her study into ongoing concerns.

In summary, defining the relevant literature requires drawing boundaries. Boundaries are about what topics (concepts) are—and are not—important and how they relate to one another. These all are decisions researchers make. I will get back to these in Chapter 7 (Samples) because deciding what to include or exclude in grounding your research in existing knowledge influences the characteristics of samples that will be important for the research.

THINKING ABOUT THE REVIEW TASK ●

The sheer magnitude of the existing literature, even when reduced to the *relevant* literature, can paralyze beginning researchers. Here is the tightrope: When designing research, you *should* want to do a very good job of finding and reading the literature, but you do *not* want to dedicate your life to it. I will offer some general suggestions on how to think about this work.

My most important suggestion is that Step 1 of your literature review should be talking to a librarian. They are trained in how to do these reviews, they can direct you to the most useful resources, and they can make your life much easier than if you attempt to go it alone. Begin with librarians rather than waiting until you have problems.

The most important tool for doing literature reviews is librarians.

If you have access to a college or university library, you also will find many excellent tutorials, often online. A Google search (*literature*

reviews) will turn up many sites offering useful tips. These can be especially helpful when they are about specific expectations associated with particular disciplines or professions. And, of course, if you are doing research for a class assignment, spend time reading (and rereading) the assignment.

Where to Look

In the not-so-distant past, the books and journals comprising the scholarly literature were physical objects located in libraries. Today, increasingly the virtual library is taking over. If you are designing research, your initial conversation with a librarian should include asking about the availability of digital resources.

Search engines, such as Google, are a primary way to locate information to answer questions in daily life. However, when I talk about the virtual library, I am talking about something that is more specific: There are data bases that track and retrieve objects in the world of scholarly research. This is *not* the same world as the commercial world of Google. Other than my advice to enlist the help of librarians, this is the most important time-saving advice I can offer:

While Google Scholar is an excellent research tool, a general Google search is *not* useful because you will be slammed with commercial and popular treatments of your topic, which are *not* helpful when you are looking for *scholarly* literature.

There are many data bases covering many scholarly literatures, and I have included a listing of some of the most common ones in social sciences at the end of this chapter. Unfortunately, the costs of subscribing to these are extraordinary which leads to inequality: Researchers with access to web libraries in large universities will be able to draw upon the resources of many data bases, while those without such access will have few options. However, Google Scholar is public access and so therefore is available. While search results often will include many articles and books that are not available, it nonetheless is a worthwhile tool. Indeed, Google Scholar has a distinct advantage over individual academic data bases in that it is not limited to particular disciplines.

Because the technology tends to be user friendly, obtaining basic competence in using these data bases will not require much of your time (librarians can be helpful in getting you started). Realize that each

search engine has advantages and disadvantages, strengths and weaknesses, limitations, and quirks. Also, although data bases are excellent tools for finding literature that appears in countless places, they are not perfect: Because each database tracks a different combination of journals, the *same* search done through two data bases can yield *different* results. Not all potentially relevant journals are included in every search engine: The more mainline the journal is (such as those sponsored by professional associations), the more likely it will be tracked by many data bases. Conversely, journals targeted to very specialized audiences are included in fewer data bases. The lesson is that you should try searches through all the data bases that are available to you.

How to Look

There are multiple search strategies. While different data bases make it more or less difficult to locate articles in particular ways, here are some of the forms of detective work you can try. I always suggest to my students that they think of doing article searches as a form of “play.” Try something and then try something else until you find what works. In many data bases, if you look at the left side of searches, you will find possibilities to narrow the search to peer review (always), to various years, to particular publications, and so on. Each of these are ways you can expand and contract the number of articles retrieved. Think creatively; try combinations of the following:

Search by keyword: What are called *concepts* in methods are called *keywords* for library searches. Many data bases allow you to search for concepts (or combinations of concepts) in the article title, in the abstract, or anywhere in the article (called *full-text*). Searching for full-text will produce the highest number of articles but many will be far from your interests; searching for keywords in titles will produce the least number of articles, yet they most likely will be on target for your interests. Searching for keywords in abstracts often produces articles that are at least somewhat relevant. Most data bases will allow you to search for two or three concepts simultaneously. You can play with various combinations of finding keywords in titles, abstracts, and full-text.

In doing keyword searches, be aware that it is only in the past 10 years or so that journals have asked authors to define the appropriate keywords. Articles that are more than 10 years old sometimes have quite strange keywords because indexing was done by people who were not experts on the topic.

Search by author: Researchers often pursue relatively consistent lines of research. If you find an article that is highly relevant to your

interests, search by that author because, chances are, he or she has done other research that you also might find relevant.

Search by *works cited*: A particularly effective search strategy is to pay attention to the references cited in articles you find relevant. What works did the article cite that are about topics important to your project? The reference list in every published article will give you the information you need to find those articles.

Search by *cited by*: Some data bases allow searching for articles that cite particular articles. If you find a relevant article, you can find what other researchers have cited that article. Chances are if you find the article relevant you'll find the works of others using that article to also be relevant.

Search by *journal title*: Because journals specialize in publishing particular kinds of research, you may find several highly relevant articles come from the same journal. When you notice this, search other issues of the journal because the chances are good that you will find more articles that are relevant.

What to Look for

You will be looking for published articles and books on your topics of interest. Look for research on your topic that reflects different philosophies (naturalist and constructionist), asks different kinds of questions (cause, meaning, inequalities), and uses different techniques to generate data (e.g., experiments, surveys, document analysis). The more views you have of your topic, the easier it will be to see where your particular research fits.

Search for published research representing different philosophies, exploring different kinds of questions, and using a variety of data generation techniques.

A serious problem to avoid is looking for and reading only those articles that seem to confirm what you already know or believe about your topic. Literature reviews that merely build a line of reasoning without attending to complexity are not convincing to readers. Reviews that do not attend to complexity also are a very poor foundation for the research itself: They will not prepare you for what you will find in the social world, or (even worse) they will encourage you to ignore complexity, which will distort your findings. I would suggest that it is beneficial to actually look for research led by theories or data

generation techniques that you are *not* attracted to. Maintain the *critical/skeptical stance* and keep the detective image in mind as you look and read and be open to clues that could send your research in an unanticipated direction.

How to Read

Identifying the “appropriate literature” and doing the work of locating your research within existing knowledge requires a great deal of reading. While sometimes the relevant literature can be found in books, it is most typical in social science disciplines for reports of research to be located in articles appearing in journals. Students often find it difficult to read and understand such reports and this is to be expected. The writing styles are very different from those in college textbooks. The *audience* for textbooks is students who are assumed to know little or nothing about the topic of the book, so textbook writers go to great lengths to explain, to give examples, to use easily accessible language, and so on. In contrast, the assumed audience for journal articles is professionals assumed to have general understandings of the topic as well as some level of general theoretical and methodological sophistication.

I have two kinds of advice for how to approach reading academic journal articles. First, *assume* journal articles will be more difficult to read than textbooks and *assume* you will not understand everything. Just as science requires logical steps, do not rush through reading journal articles and do not get discouraged if you do not understand everything. It often is the case that, while not understanding everything, you can understand enough to figure out what the research is about and what the findings are. Most importantly, *critical thinking* can help you decipher writing that is especially dense. Even with little knowledge of the specific content, you often will be able to evaluate the logical nature of the research questions, the fit between the questions and methods, the quality of the sample, and the extent to which the research and the author’s interpretation make sense in a common sense type of a way. Granted, it is not perfect, and you still might not understand everything. Yet this is far better than simply ignoring everything that seems difficult to read. With practice, you will find it easier to understand articles in academic journals.

Second, you do *not* need to read every sentence of every article. Start with the abstracts, the summaries of the research located at the beginning of reports. Because abstracts are short, you can (and should) read them carefully. Look for the research question, the data generation

techniques, the sample, and the major findings. Some articles that have interesting titles will turn out to be of little or no use to you. If that is the case, then go on to the next article. If there seems to be something interesting you should continue to read the article. The more pertinent the article, the more carefully you should read it. Keep notes of the articles you have read because it is likely that your interests will change over time and something that seems not relevant when you begin your research might seem more relevant as you progress.

What to Read for

I am now going to repeat what I said in an earlier section of this chapter: Literature reviews can offer you three kinds of information that lead to high-quality research design: information about content, information about method, and information about communication form. These are the things you should read for, and expect that rarely will you find an article that is excellent for all three. Some will be excellent for content, others for method, and others for communication form.

Reading for content: The primary goal of reviewing the existing literature is to understand the current state of knowledge: What already is known about your proposed topic? What gaps do other researchers identify in this knowledge?

Reading for method: When designing research, you are interested in how others have pursued research on this topic. What kinds of research have others done? Can you use their measurements or their data generation techniques? Can you learn from problems they experienced? Do they have advice for doing research on the topic?

Reading for communication form: The best way to learn how to write your own research is to read research that is published. Study articles for their form. How do authors introduce a study? What information is included in the first paragraph? Where is the research question first introduced? How and where is the question restated? How is the literature review introduced? How are the samples and method described?

● THE CONTENTS AND FORM OF LITERATURE REVIEWS

When you are reviewing the literature, you will notice that there are many ways of writing reviews. However, reviews tend to share particular kinds of both contents and forms.

First, literature reviews have a particular *content*. They clearly describe the questions that are being asked (Chapter 3). They also

locate the research within the ongoing scholarly dialogue. This is done by summarizing current understandings and by discussing why what we already know leads to the need for the present research (the focus in this chapter). Literature reviews also define the primary concepts (our next topic, in Chapter 5). While this information can appear in any order, these are the elements in *all* literature reviews.

Second, literature reviews have a particular *form*. Again, while there are many specific models for writing reviews, what all of them share is that they are in essay form and characterized by the following:

The content should proceed from topic to topic: While a primary work of the literature review is summarizing what already is known, this should *not* be presented as a series of paragraphs that each summarizes a particular piece of prior research. The object is to offer summary statements of existing research as a *whole*, not summaries of particular articles or books.

The content should include what is necessary for readers to understand the context of the research, and it should include only what is necessary: For example, particular methods used in a reviewed study should not be discussed unless they are important to establish why the current proposed method is better; specifics about samples in previous studies should not be discussed unless they are important to the particular project, and so on.

The content is characterized by good writing: In the real world of journal publishing, reviewers will refuse to review a manuscript that is poorly written. Do not allow problems in writing to stop your audience from understanding your good ideas.

The content is properly cited: Proper citations are critical for two reasons. First and foremost, ideas and knowledge are the products of academic labor, so citations give credit to the original author. Second, citations are important for people who read articles. Scholars can read cited work in order to increase their knowledge of the topic and citations can be used in order to understand the history of ideas contained in the report.

EVALUATING LITERATURE REVIEWS ●

While I have organized this chapter primarily around issues surrounding literature reviews in research design, my comments and suggestions have implications for evaluating reviews written by others.

As you evaluate reviews remember that you cannot expect authors to give readers all the information that is known about a topic. In the first place, too much already is known about everything so it is not possible to summarize it all. More important is that it is possible to give readers

too much information, which is harmful because it does not give readers the GPS coordinates necessary to understand where the research fits in the ongoing scholarly dialog. Your evaluation of the content of literature reviews in published research should be informed by two considerations. First are the practicalities: Did the author tell you enough about what already is known so that you understand where the research fits in the scholarly literature? Is the research placed in an appropriate context, even if that context is one of many possible? Second, you should evaluate the extent to which discussions the author did—and didn't—include are logical and together work to define the study.

Remember also that manuscripts are written for specific audiences. Reports of research in professional journals are written for an audience of professionals assumed to have professional level understandings of both the topics and the methods. Assume these reports will be difficult to read; assume you will not understand the details in many of them. Yet also assume that if you read slowly and critically, you often will be able to understand enough to learn from the article. Taking the time to learn how to read articles reporting social science research is necessary to develop methodological thinking skills. The alternative is remaining ignorant and ignorance never is a good choice.

● LITERATURE REVIEWS AND RESEARCH DESIGN

Unless you are doing a simple replication of an existing study, reviewing the literature is an ongoing design task. Expect that you will return to the literature from time to time throughout the research process; what reports of research seem particularly important can change over time. Rather than thinking of reviewing the work of others as endless, try thinking of the existing literature as your friend, somewhere you can go to help you understand what already is known and what other researchers have thought about and learned.

Just as the process of writing questions cannot be separated from the literature review, the literature review cannot be separated from the design task called *measurement*, which is about defining key concepts and deciding how they will be measured in the research. Measurement (conceptualization and operationalization) is our next topic.

Conceptualization/ operationalization in existing studies	⇒	Insights for conceptualization/ operationalization decisions for the proposed study
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EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL RESEARCH ARTICLE DATABASES ●

If you are at a large university, you will have hundreds of academic data bases from which to choose; if you are at a smaller college, you might have only one or two. Here are some examples:

Academic Search Primer

This is the world's largest scholarly, multidisciplinary, full-text database and contains more than 3,600 peer-reviewed publications as well as indexing and abstracts for more than 8,200 journals.

Criminal Justice Periodicals

This is a professionally compiled periodicals database for criminal justice scholars. It provides total access to 45 criminal justice journals, plus complete abstracts for over 100 additional titles.

NCJRS: National Criminal Justice Reference Service Abstracts

These abstracts are published by the Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice's National Criminal Justice Reference Service, an information clearinghouse for research, police, and practice related to criminal and juvenile justice and drug control.

PsycINFO

This database covers the professional academic literature in psychology, medicine, psychiatry, nursing, sociology, education, pharmacology, physiology, linguistics, and other such topics. It also contains over 1,300 journals and dissertations in over 30 languages and book chapters that are written in English.

Social Sciences Full Text

This is a database that covers 756 core periodicals in the following subjects: anthropology, economics, geography, law and criminology, political science, social work, sociology, and international relations.

Social Services Abstracts

This database provides indexes and abstracts of current research (1980 to present) in social work, human services, social welfare, social policy, and community development.

Sociological Abstracts

This database abstracts and indexes the international literature in sociology and related disciplines in the social and behavioral sciences and contains citations from 1963 to present, journal articles, book reviews, books, book chapters, dissertations, and conference papers.

Web of Science/Web of Knowledge

This database accesses Science Citation Expanded, Social Sciences Citation Index, and Arts & Humanities Citation Index; it also contains links to approximately 8,500 of the most prestigious, high-impact research journals in the world.

Wilson Omnifile Full Text Mega Edition

This multidisciplinary database provides the complete content—indexing, abstracting and full text—from six of Wilson's full-text databases: education, general science, humanities, readers' guide, social sciences, and business.

Worldwide Political Science Abstracts

This is a database that contains citations, abstracts, and indexing of the international literature in political science and its complementary fields, including international relations and public administration and policy. Its major areas include comparative politics, developing nations, disarmament, economic policy, electoral systems, environmental policy, international relations and trade, labor relations, and military policy.