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LITERATURE SEARCHING AND REVIEWING

The distinction between empirical research literature and theoretical literature is important in this chapter.

The idea of empirical research literature is straightforward and easy to understand. It is important for students to be familiar with the sources and locations of the research literature, and knowledge of the research journals in the relevant topic and area is especially important here.

The objective of reviewing research literature is to paint an overall picture about the evidence in relation to the topic and research question(s) – to bring us up to date with what is known about this question. A common problem in social science research, however, is that the different bits and pieces of evidence often do not fit well together, so painting a consistent and coordinated overall picture can be difficult. Instead, the picture is often messy. I stress to students that it is important to point this out, where it occurs. This very fact can often provide a connection and justification for your study – because the picture from the assembled evidence is confusing, inconsistent or fragmentary, it is important to conduct further research in order to clarify.

The idea of the theoretical literature is sometimes more difficult to grasp. There is often no clearly identifiable body of writing which contains it and sometimes it may have to be teased out and assembled from several sources. Sometimes, too, relevant 'theorising' about a topic can be found in books rather than in research journals. Hart's questions, shown in section 6.3(b), can be helpful in gathering ideas about how to make the theoretical literature more concrete for students.

As section 6.3(c) stresses, making connections to your own study, when discussing both the research and theoretical literature, is important. The more you can do this, the more your literature review is integrated into your study, rather than standing apart from it (as so often happens). Opportunities for pointing out the justification and contribution your study makes should be taken advantage of, and what is said in the literature review can also be very useful in the later stages of a thesis, when discussing and interpreting the study's findings.

I think the five stages suggested for carrying out a literature review are straightforward and self-explanatory. A point worth stressing is the need to be well organised with respect to filing, and recording bibliographic details. Time put into organising before carrying out a review always pays dividends later on.

Being critical (section 6.5) is singled out because a review of the literature at this level is expected to be a critical review. The term 'critical' here includes the idea of criticism but goes well beyond that idea. It means analysing and reflecting on what is contained in the literature, rather than just summarising and reporting what is there. And it means scrutinising claims, rather than just uncritically accepting them. It is not criticism for the sake of criticism and it is not necessarily negative. When an appropriate critical stance is shown in reviewing literature, it indicates a certain maturity in dealing with what is published. And it is a central part of demonstrating mastery, which is a clear expectation at this level of work.

The 'common problems' I have listed in section 6.6 are distilled from years of working with graduate students. The one which may need explanation and discussion is the levels of abstraction example, shown first in the box. This issue comes up in several places throughout the book and is one of the least discussed but utterly central operations that we use – not only in the research world but also in our dealings with the world in general. It is useful to develop a portfolio of examples to operationalise the idea of moving up and down across levels of abstraction.

In addition to the examples given, here is a historical example from political science research in the USA. A common finding from researching voting patterns and behaviour was the empirical generalisation that Roman Catholics tended to vote Democrat (perhaps that is still the case in recent US elections – I'm not sure). The question is why that might be the case. The reasoning which illustrates raising the level of abstraction went as follows:

> Catholics, in general, tend to be less well off in socio-economic terms than many other groups in US society. So Roman Catholics can be seen as an example of a socio-economically less well-off group. Notice that 'less well-off group' is a more abstract category than 'Roman Catholics'. To say the same thing differently, Roman Catholics are a specific example of a less well-off group.

> To vote Democrat is to vote for the party more likely to change things in society – Republicans, historically, are more conservative and less likely to support change. Again, notice that 'party more likely to change things' is a more abstract category than 'Democrat' – that is, Democrat is a specific example of a party more likely to change things.

So now we have this proposition:

> People in less well-off socio-economic categories tend to vote for the political party they see as more likely to change things.

Clearly, this proposition is at a more general level than 'Roman Catholics in the US tend to vote Democrat'. It is at a higher level of abstraction. Being more general, and at a higher level of abstraction, we now have a proposition that is (potentially) applicable in other countries and situations than the USA. We could investigate this more general proposition in the UK, Canada, Australia or India, etc. We also have an explanation of the original empirical generalisation, in the usual if-then structure of scientific

knowledge: If it is true that people in less well-off socio-economic categories tend to vote for the political party they see as more likely to change things, then it follows that Catholics in the US will tend to vote Democrat.

The research journal literature

A concern that I have, working in different universities in different countries, is that higher degree students do not always know the research journal literature in their field as well as they should (and, in some cases, sadly, do not know it at all). The research journal literature is of course the primary vehicle for dissemination and communication of research among the world's researchers in any field. I think the sooner students are introduced to it, the better.

Being old-fashioned, I still like to do it by physically browsing the research journals on library shelves. These days, it is of course much more easily and efficiently done through electronic browsing, with many of the top research journals now online. The SAGE journal collection (www.sagepub.com) is among the world's most important resources for researchers.

Expanding on this idea, I strongly recommend what I call 'journal research'. By this, I mean browsing the top international refereed journals in a particular research area on a regular basis. I think this carries several different benefits and I recommend it for higher degree students and junior staff members. Some of the benefits are:

- keeping up to date and in touch with trends in research
- seeing who is doing what
- understanding how research journals operate — the peer review system
- getting ideas for one's own research
- developing a sense of self-efficacy about doing research and writing and publishing papers — developing the sense that 'I can see how this is done' and then also: 'I can do this sort of work'.

Such benefits are tangible and very valuable. If time permits, I set one or more exercises to browse recent editions of two or three top journals and report back to the class on such things as journal policy, the review process and what areas and topics are being reported on, using what methodological approaches (this last point is especially valuable). I particularly recommend (and require) that students read journal policy statements.

How to identify the top journals

Students need to understand that there is an important status ranking among research journals, and, in particular, that not all so-called 'research journals' have great credibility. They need to understand the characteristics which give a research journal high status and credibility, using such indicators as:

- a clear, transparent and stringent peer review system
- an international editorial board, with representatives from top universities around the world
- international authors
- an international readership.

For me, the phrase 'international refereed journals' sums up the key ideas. Once again, regular journal research (as defined above) will help to identify which are the top-ranked journals. Further, discussions with experienced researchers, attendance at conferences, etc. will confirm whether the student's judgements about journals are on the right track.

In addition, there is now a great deal of information available about journal rankings, focusing very much on the concept of 'impact'. While this whole area is not without controversy, the central idea is to try to achieve a journal ranking system, which has objectivity in the sense that top researchers agree with it and accept it, and which stresses the idea of impact – the concept that some journal articles (and some journals) are widely read and cited, and have a much bigger impact than other articles (and journals).

At this time, the 'gold standard' for social science research journals appears to be those in the Social Sciences Citation Index, a copy of which is attached. But note that entries on such a list will change from time to time and, in any case, not all researchers and/or universities would necessarily agree with such a list. (I am indebted to my colleague at the University of Western Australia, Winthrop Professor Tom O'Donoghue, for his advice on this matter.)