

CRITICAL REVIEW OF LITERATURE IN SOCIAL RESEARCH

Ezebunwa E. Nwokocha
Department of Sociology
Faculty of the Social Sciences
University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Background

For some inexperienced researchers, reviewing literature is just one of those implicit requirements for accepting a manuscript for publication in a journal or for the paper to appear cosmetically academic, and not necessarily for its epistemic value. It should be more than that, and in fact ought to be the least reason for engaging in the exercise. Even among some researchers who conceive it as an important ingredient of a study or manuscript, it is often detached from the process of research conceptualization. In the latter sense, the researcher works to the answer by undertaking a review based on already decided topical variables. Thus, the literature section is, in a number of instances, the most neglected part of a manuscript; a situation borne mainly out of ignorance of what constitutes critical search for truth. Interestingly, several people do not consider the teaching of the fundamentals of reviewing literature as an essential aspect of research methodology. Consequently, a large number of researchers begin their reviewing activity on the basis of conjecture that is bereft of any form of formal tutelage (Boote and Beile 2005). Hence, for the most part, literature review is conceived in some quarters as a haphazard venture as it relates to content and timing.

Ideally, literature review should commence at conception of a study and run through the entire period of research (Nwankwo and Emunemu 2015). A paper that is rooted in timely and extensive review of literature is markedly different from another for which less emphasis is placed on when review begins and robustness. Early reviews lead to prompt identification of gaps in knowledge which is a prerequisite to forestalling academic redundancy on one hand and *reinventing the wheel* on another (Kim 2015; Bui 2009). Although a researcher, before the review, may have decided on engaging certain dependent and independent variables in the research process, emerging insights from reviews may however clearly suggest that toeing that line will most likely not situate the study on the threshold of adding to knowledge. As a corollary, the researcher will eventually hardly scream *eureka* (I have discovered) in the end if s/he continues on that path. To be sure, unless and until the shout of discovery (*waooooo...*) becomes the swan-song of a researcher in a particular study

engagement, little or no additions would have been made to scholarship irrespective of efforts that may have gone into it.

Needless to say, being on top of one's research endeavour in a globalising academic space constitutes in being abreast with prevailing ideas and perspectives. It is necessary to state at this juncture that we are not in any way suggesting that once a study has been carried out in one location or period of time, it forecloses the chances of replication in another site or another time in the guise of striving for discovery. On the contrary, review of literature will reveal the content and context of an earlier study and therefore opens up an array of insights for a related research if necessary. In such a situation, acknowledging the existence of an earlier study, beyond indicating modesty, also reinforces the fact that a researcher is not insulated from events and activities of colleagues in the knowledge production, propagation and sustainability enterprise. Moreover, such an acknowledgement shields the paper and the author from avoidable but damaging criticisms related to lack of originality. Plagiarism ranks very high among the most serious offences in scholarship and shall be discussed more elaborately later in this chapter.

Without qualifying it with the adjective 'critical', every literature review undertaken for academic purposes is expected to be analysed and written critically. Most often, we see a barrage of 'according to; observed; noted; stated; opined; averred' among other verbs and dates adorning pages of the literature section of some papers. While this is not condemnable in itself and, in indeed, may represent some level of robustness, it does not indicate criticality if the author fails to go beyond mentioning names, dates and the content of the essay that was supposed to have been reviewed. By implication, reviewing literature supposes that the reviewer makes a concrete and opinionated comment about the article, essay or paper that was reviewed; not just making a boring re-phrasal or re-statement of what is contained in an essay. Ensuing judgemental statement by the reviewer following the review could take any of the three forms which include acceptance, extension or rejection of the views canvassed in the reviewed piece. Doing this would translate to going beyond 'name dropping' or 'literature presentation' to the level of literature appraisal or assessment particularly as it pertains to the study being undertaken.

Critical review of literature is an invitation to undertake a holistic view of an existing paper or study by, among other things, identifying its inherent strengths and weaknesses as they relate to the work at hand (Bui 2009). It is only on the basis of such informed outlook that a researcher could accept, extend or reject the central argument canvassed therein. Perhaps, it is apt to state here that no matter how divergent a researcher's views may seem

with the one presented in the reviewed document, the norm of academic decorum discourages the use of offensive or discourteous language either on the writer or the idea that a paper portrays. Put differently, it is indeed a contradiction for a researcher to adopt *argumentum ad hominem abusive* as a way of expressing disagreement or concerns with what another scholar had written. Thus, it should be borne in mind at all times that ideas are relative to individuals, times and places. The aim of this chapter is to discuss the role that literature review plays in assisting researchers to identify and bridge gaps in knowledge and that way situate their own study within the realm of contemporaneous orientation.

Importance of Literature Review

The essence of reviewing literature in social science research engagement was alluded to in the preceding section. In this segment, we devote more time to explain this looking at issues which touch on clarity, methodology, scope and context (Kim 2015; Bui 2009).

Ensure Clarity – one of the most important reasons for reviewing literature is to seek clarification on issues that are fuzzy, blurred and sometimes contentious with regard to the focus of the research problem. The purpose is to ensure that, in the end, a study is relevant to the prevailing discourse as well as situated within the limits of disciplinary tolerance.

Enhance Methodology – eliciting data is more complex in some phenomena than others and may require that the researcher seeks information on how similar complexity was resolved in studies conducted earlier. Although the context may be different, adapting the methodological procedure employed successfully by other scholars may prove not only essential in dealing with the dilemma at hand, but also in enhancing the latitude within which data collection takes place. For instance, researchers face hard times collecting data from hard-to-reach groups such as homosexuals, prostitutes, armed robbers, cultists among others, and had to struggle with the decision of whether to refocus their studies or continue. Vacating this research crossroad will require exposure to views of others, and probably more experienced researchers, on how best to navigate this situation.

We may discover to our surprise that the seemingly difficult landscape may be demystified by how easy data on such groups were elicited in earlier studies, through, for instance, the Snowball Technique or the Mystery Client approach or others methods that may not have been considered as options. It is also possible that the procedures that lend themselves for adoption are totally alien to the researcher, thereby necessitating skills update to enable him/her use the resource effectively, thus creating an avenue for learning and enhancement of competencies.

Defining Scope of Study – extensive search of information on what exists will enable the researcher to delineate the scope of his/her own study. Without clearly streamlining the areas of interest, a study may lack focus and in the final analysis not make meaningful contribution to knowledge. Hence, reviews are meant to showcase all the necessary ideas on a subject matter and that way give the reviewer the leverage of choice of focus and scope.

Compare Findings – review of literature is also essential for elaborate engagement of results of a study. It is now common practice for scholars to devote a section of their manuscript to discussion of findings wherein existing data are juxtaposed with the findings of a new study. This is done to compare contexts in terms of spatial and temporal variations in order to make concrete statements about differences or similarities in dynamics, trends and patterns of events that constitute social reality, (Nwankwo and Emunemu 2015)

Sources of literature

Print – Unlike what existed in earlier times when researchers had very limited access to works in related areas of study or academic interest, contemporary scholars have, relatively unrestricted, access to a catalogue of literature sources. This is made easier by improvements in information and communication technology. Until recently, most insights needed to understand what existed in the knowledge sphere, as a take-off point for another study derived mainly from print materials such as journals, books, reports, newsletters and manuscripts presented at special lectures, conferences, seminars and symposia. Although veritable sources of literature, authors have limited access to these print materials due to issues related spatial differences between where the author resides and where materials are located. Consequently, most people undertake their analysis with what is available, which is rarely exhaustive.

In the search for more information, many researchers consult newspapers and magazines. While acknowledging that these journalistic materials serve useful purposes in society, scholars in the social sciences view these with caution and hardly employ them in academic discourses. Their scepticism is rooted in the apparent lack trust in media information, which often is sensationalized or represents biased views of the publishers or editors. One major advantage of acceptable print materials is that information on the sources consulted is quite clear and can be referenced easily. It is unlike what obtains with most other sources where the author would have to struggle to present an acceptable reference for

materials cited in a manuscript. For the purposes of ease of reference, quite a number of authors prefer print materials over other sources.

Electronic - Materials found on the internet and websites belong to this category. We note here that virtually all the platforms mentioned in the print media are now produced electronically. For some publication outfits, manuscripts are produced both electronically and in print. In some instances, however, materials are only in electronic form. It is important to state at this point that while the strength of materials in electronic media lies in their wide coverage and accessible to people in all parts of the world, its major limitation is that chances exist for junk information to be put across globally from obscure unverifiable locations. With the advent of online publications, there is now a multiplicity of 'predatory' journals turning out several volumes of poorly researched and poorly edited articles in all scholarly disciplines. The implication that the above scenario portends for sound scholarship is that an author must carefully scrutinize materials accessed from the internet in order not to undermine the quality of his/her publication. Perhaps, globalization finds its most major expression in electronic media given the number of people that avail themselves of the use of that facility; serious-minded academics as a matter of necessity are meant to key into this global movement. To be sure, modern day scholars can only embark on cutting age research by being conversant with electronic technology and sources of information. We present below two important but neglected aspects of literature materials – official publications and gray literature.

Official Publication – This is also known as gazette, which is usually a document containing classified information published either at specified periods or as major events occur. Important government decisions are made public through such documents. Big organizations and corporations including the United Nations, World Bank, World Health Organization among others use this as a means of communicating official information to the public.

Gray literature – Important information for literature review may be stored away in obscure places as reports, records, documents and research outputs. Access to such data is usually approved by organizations such as corporations, ministries, agencies and academic institutions. A quantum of information exist in doctoral theses, masters dissertation and bachelors project which are strictly speaking not in the public domain particularly if the researcher does not make extra efforts to have part of it published in journals, edited volume or into a book. Figure 1 summarises the sources and essence of literature in research.

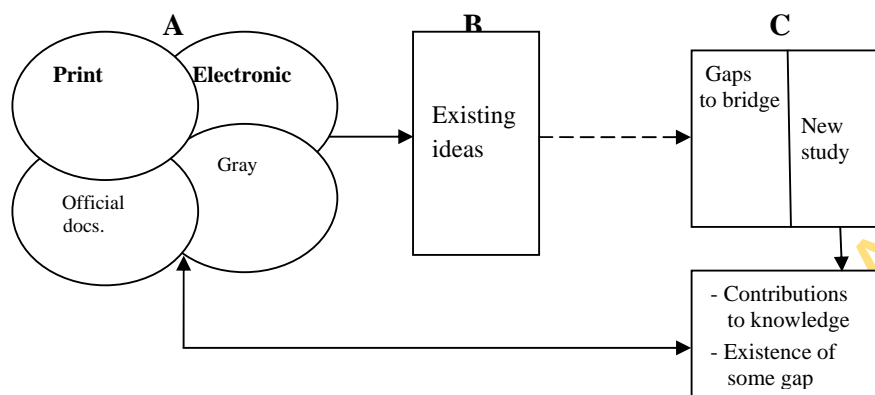


Figure 1: Framework for explaining literature review
 Source: Author

The framework indicates that a combination of sources is essential for attaining comprehensiveness in engaging existing knowledge. In an increasingly dynamic and sophisticated age, limiting literature search to a medium undermines the essence of fullness in the search for truth. A scholar can only claim to have identified gaps in knowledge only when a thorough and extensive review of previous works has truly been undertaken. The column C part of the framework which has a semblance of an open book reveals the interaction between gaps in knowledge and the need for a new study. It also symbolically suggests that gaps and the quest for more inquiry are unending and always open to all in the academic community.

Dimensions of Literature Review

Two main dimensions are easily identifiable – empirical and theoretical reviews. Ideally, these two aspects are not supposed to be exclusive, but complementary and mutually reinforcing. Experience shows that unlike the practice in physical, medical and biological sciences where empirical reviews are common, social scientists hardly emphasize this distinction and mainly undertake the theoretical aspect of the exercise.

Empirical Reviews – are based on previous studies that focused on field research mainly involving experimentation, survey, observation among others. Primarily, the reviewer’s target is to appraise the process, methodology and results of a study in order to describe the procedure through which a body of knowledge is produced (Nwankwo and Emunemu 2015). Empirical reviews seek for evidences of how scholars had previously carried out their trade and on that basis decide on the most appropriate approach to adopt for the research on hand. In some instances, and depending on the level of complexity, a combination of techniques

may be employed in order to address all the issues that a thematic phenomenon may encompass.

Theoretical Reviews – this type of review is common in the humanities and social sciences. The focus of researchers when undertaking such exercise is to reappraise new ideas, concepts and paradigms. As Punch (2009) observed, theoretical reviews are meant to deal with virtually everything there is to think about in a topic. By implication, this kind of review should ordinarily cover both empirical and conceptual issues, which broadly speaking is more elaborate than the empirical.

Structure of Literature

The extent to which an author effectively organizes the literature has implications for its usefulness in a given academic context. In certain situations, the potential efficacy, insights and efforts put into searching for earlier credible information on a particular topical issue are undermined by inability to streamline the ideas clearly. Perhaps, such poor organizational skill undermines and detracts more from the whole essence of the review than paucity of data. As a corollary, robustness and currency of information could be marred by a very weak presentation that may manifest in several forms including clumsiness, inelegance and avoidable repetitions.

In its most basic form, literature review is expected to be arranged systematically and in sub-headings to reflect specific objectives of the study. Apart from demarcating the issues for clarity, organizing the literature thematically ensures not only that the most important subjects are engaged but also that extensiveness is emphasized. It is imperative to note that the use of paragraphs as part and parcel of literature layout is not a substitute for sub-headings. They are complementary. Indeed, identifying gaps in knowledge is better achieved by carefully reviewing what scholars have done in the past in terms of stated objective(s) which are better arranged by sub-headings. Equipped with information on existing lacunae, a scholar therefore immerses him/herself in a thought process that drives research activities towards bridging the gap.

Another important aspect of the review that should be understood is use of verbatim quotations in some instances to buttress a point. While this is acceptable, it needs to be stated that full reference to a quotation should include surname of author, date of publication and the page number from which the quotation is culled. With such author information, the source is verifiable and other people would have easy access to same information when needed. Quotation layout depends on the length. Quotations that span three lines and above are meant

to be indented and single-spaced; they are not to be differentiated by inverted-comas, as what they represent is already known by the indentation. A typical indented quotation is shown below – for instance, Omolawal (2014:84) examined the contradictions of underdevelopment in Nigeria by stating that:

Nigeria is a nation blessed with abundant natural and human resources but unfortunately her level of development has not been commensurate with the expected outcomes of effective utilization of the abundant resources.

We caution here that unnecessarily lengthy quotations are not advisable and may lose their punch in verbosity. For quotations that are less than three lines, only inverted-comas are to be employed; such excerpts are not to be indented but flow into the sentences that host them.

In situations where a scholar paraphrased or reflected ideas embodied in a text but did not quote verbatim, s/he as a matter of obligation must reference the source by indicating the surname of author and date of publication. Where there are two or more authors, the surname of all these and date on which the manuscript was published are to be included at first citation. Subsequently, first author's surname and *et al.*, in italics (meaning, 'and others') is to be used thereafter. In this case, adding the page number is not necessary and in fact not permissible, as the issue for which paraphrasing was undertaken may also be found in several other pages of the same document being referred to. The use of *ibid* and/or *op.cit* for subsequent referencing although common in the humanities and law, which are relatively older academic disciplines, is highly discouraged in social science publications. In avoiding this style of presentation, the social scientist aligns with his/her disciplinary ethos and specification. In addition, footnotes although not popular among many social scientists are used sparingly to provide further explanation and/or clarification to an issue and for the purposes of emphasis.

Immediately after conclusion, a reference section is to be included wherein the authors of consulted works are to be listed alphabetically. The style of referencing to adopt for a study will depend on the format approved by the publication outfit that the researcher intends to have the manuscript published. For instance, while many journals prefer the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing style, some recommend specific relatively unknown styles; yet others are not particular about style. It is apt at this point to state that several authors can hardly differentiate between references and bibliography. While the former implies presenting all the works cited in the body of a manuscript, the latter includes both cited and non-cited works that have relevance to the extant paper. Generally, the strength of literature review lies in its currency, comprehensiveness and organization.

Limitations to Literature reviews and Presentation

Appropriate reviews are desirable but require considerable efforts by the researcher in terms of search and synthesis. The challenges of adequate reviews are several; some of them are discussed below.

Lack or poor access to relevant materials – Although sources of literature increased with considerable improvement in Information Communications Technology (ICT) particularly with the emergence of the web and internet, several researchers in less developed countries still have restricted access to relevant academic literature. The reasons are both individual and structural. At individual level, the researcher may for some personal reasons, such as family pressure, laxity and lay-back attitude, not explore all necessary options. We also note that some people that complain about paucity of information, neither know what to search for nor how to go about it, in the actual sense. For example, early into the introduction of GSM phone technology in Nigeria, many young researchers involved in exploratory study readily identified lack of information as a major limitation. Getting around such challenge would require reviewing literature on new technology and linking or adapting it to GSM to enable a researcher to leverage on the principle of moving from ‘general’ to ‘the particular’. At the structural level, the limitations are institutional and mainly supra-individual. These may include issues such as prolonged power outage spanning days and weeks, poor or lack of internet access and conflicts/restiveness among others.

Adherence to guidelines of some outlets – Most journals restrict authors to a limited number of pages which also implies control over what is permissible for each sub-section including the literature aspect. Thus, even when the scholar is capable of presenting extensive review, the restriction undermines robustness. Thus, although enormous skill may be brought to bear in synthesizing and condensing the most important ideas, there are limits to which all relevant information can be utilized.

Meeting Deadlines – For different reasons including meeting deadlines, and engrossment with several activities among others, researchers engage assistants in information gathering needed for a review. While this is not bad in itself, the level of enthusiasm and acquaintance with the issues under consideration exhibited by these delegates may sometimes not reflect author’s commitment to achieving comprehensiveness. Apart from the shallowness that may

inhere in such reviews, inability to verify sources and statements written by assistants may expose the author to the vagaries of plagiarism. Overcoming this common challenge will require personal and early commencement of review activities far ahead of deadlines on one hand, and comprehensive vetting of submissions from assistants on the other. In any case, the author must be ready to take full responsibility for failure to adhere strictly to the rules of academic publication.

Poor organizational skill – there is temptation among a large number of researchers to access a catalogue of information from a host of sources. This is made easier by the existence of internet facilities, which are in some instances, largely accessible to reviewers. However, fewer individuals have the requisite competences to effectively manage the quantum of information at their disposal and as a result unable to fully utilize available resources. Indeed, the likelihood of missing out important information is high in such circumstance unless the researcher is sufficiently organized to segregate data by content and contextual uniformity.

Deliberate attempt to conceal information – Researcher bias may play out in concealment of parts of information that could have added value to the content of review. Selective presentation of review of literature contradicts two norms of the scientific community namely; ‘disinterestedness’ and ‘honesty’. While the former supposes that a scholar expresses no latent or manifest interest in who might be affected by the outcome of a study, the latter relates to prioritization of sincerity in academic enterprises, no matter the circumstance.

Plagiarism in Literature Review

This is considered the most grievous offence in scholarship which many researchers, unfortunately, still take with levity. It involves copying, lifting or bootlegging parts or the entire work done in the past by other researchers or self without proper referencing or acknowledgement. No matter how little plagiarism may seem, it translates to illegal use and/or breach of copyright and to that extent a legal issue (Kim 2015). One neglected form of plagiarism is that in which an author re-presents part(s) of his/her earlier ideas without acknowledging self. Although seen as less serious offence than when it involves another author, it should be borne in mind that a breach is also committed in such instance.

In an age of technology exemplified by internet access, it is quite difficult to conceal cases of plagiarism except for publications that appear in substandard faceless outfits that are not internet based. Scholars aspiring for global relevance consider such platforms an antithesis to sound scholarship and must be avoided. To be sure, reputable institutions

respond to cases of plagiarism involving their staff with strong negative sanctions ranging from persuading the culprit to withdraw such publication to outright dismissal. These sanctions may serve two purposes: saving the institution's name as it dissociates itself from the offender and serving as deterrent to others. It is important to state here that there now exists computer software (*plagiarism checker*) that can detect ideas that are not original to a particular manuscript.

We acknowledge that there may be isolated cases of seemingly genuine ignorance wherein the author may canvass an idea or thought as original without knowing that in reality it already exists. Yet, it is common knowledge that ignorance is not a tenable alibi for infraction of the law. Therefore, taking precaution, such as scrutinizing all manuscripts before pushing them into the public sphere, using the above software or any other means of verification, is the surest way of avoiding being entangled in the web of plagiarism and its concomitant consequences.

Conclusion

As much as literature review has been identified as the pivot upon which forging a competitive research agenda rests, for several reasons, many African researchers are still deficient in it. In most universities in the continent, review of literature is hardly considered an important component of research methodology and therefore not taught as a distinct subject. Hence, a large number of students, even at graduate level, have residual and peripheral knowledge of what should constitute an acceptable review. Over time, this lacuna became entrenched in the social science research protocol, which also explains knowledge recycling and intellectual stagnation in some quarters.

With the persistent expansion of information base driven by the internet revolution, adducing a compelling justification for failure at undertaking extensive and insightful literature review has become increasingly difficult, even when there are obvious challenges to sound scholarship in Africa particularly Nigeria. As a consequence, the research potentials of scholars in the region are not fully harnessed as is the case in more advanced societies. We are however convinced that African researchers are capable of and would indeed contribute significantly to the pool of intellectual harvest by putting more efforts at understanding issues as they unfold in other parts of the globe.

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