research study: reviewing the literature, considering ethical issues, designing a study, measuring aspects of the social world, and deciding on what data to collect.

THE LITERATURE REVIEW

An early and essential step in doing a study is to review the accumulated knowledge on your research question. This applies to all research questions and all types of studies. As in other areas of life, it is wise to find out what others have already learned about an issue before you address it on your own. Clichés reinforce this advice: Do not waste time "reinventing the wheel" and remember to "do your homework" before beginning an endeavor. This holds true whether you are a consumer of research or will be beginning a study yourself.

We begin by looking at the various purposes the review might serve. We will also discuss what *the literature* is, where to find it, and what it contains. Next we will explore techniques for systematically conducting a review. Finally, we will look at how to write a review and what its place is in a research report.

Doing a literature review builds on the idea that knowledge accumulates and that we can learn from and build on what others have done. The review rests on the principle that scientific research is a collective effort, one in which many researchers contribute and share results with one another. Although some studies may be especially important and a few individual researchers may become famous, one study is just a tiny part of the overall process of creating knowledge. Today's studies build on those of yesterday. We read studies to learn from, compare, replicate, or criticize them.

Literature reviews vary in scope and depth. Different kinds of reviews are stronger at fulfilling one or another of four goals (see Expansion Box 1, Goals of a Literature Review). Doing an extensive professional summary review that covers all of the research literature on a broad question could take years by a skilled researcher. On the other hand, the same person could finish a narrowly focused review in a specialized area in a week. To begin a

EXPANSION BOX 1

Goals of a Literature Review

1. *To demonstrate a familiarity with a body of knowledge and establish credibility.* A review tells a reader that the researcher knows the research in an area and knows the major issues. A good review increases a reader's confidence in the researcher's professional competence, ability, and background.
2. *To show the path of prior research and how a current project is linked to it.* A review outlines the direction of research on a question and shows the development of knowledge. A good review places a research project in a context and demonstrates its relevance by making connections to a body of knowledge.
3. *To integrate and summarize what is known in an area.* A review pulls together and synthesizes different results. A good review points out areas in which prior studies agree, disagree, and major questions remain. It collects what is known up to a point in time and indicates the direction for future research.
4. *To learn from others and stimulate new ideas.* A review tells what others have found so that a researcher can benefit from the efforts of others. A good review identifies blind alleys and suggests hypotheses for replication. It divulges procedures, techniques, and research designs worth copying so that a researcher can better focus hypotheses and gain new insights.

review, you must pick a topic area or research question, determine how much time and effort you can devote to the study, settle on the appropriate level of depth, and decide on the best type of review for your situation (see Expansion Box 2, Six Types of Literature Reviews). You can combine features of each type in a specific review.

Literature Meta-Analysis

A literature **meta-analysis** is a special technique used to create an integrative review or a methodological review.[1] Meta-analysis involves gathering the details about a large number of previous studies

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EXPANSION BOX 2

Six Types of Literature Reviews

1. *Context review.* A common type of review in which the author links a specific study to a larger body of knowledge. It often appears at the beginning of a research report and introduces the study by situating it within a broader framework and showing how it continues or builds on a developing line of thought or study.

2. *Historical review.* A specialized review in which the author traces an issue over time. It can be merged with a theoretical or methodological review to show how a concept, theory, or research method developed over time.

3. *Integrative review.* A common type of review in which the author presents and summarizes the current state of knowledge on a topic, highlighting agreements and disagreements within it. This review is often combined with a context review or may be published as an independent article as a service to other researchers.

4. *Methodological review.* A specialized type of integrative review in which the author compares and evaluates the relative methodological strength of various studies and shows how different methodologies (e.g., research designs, measures, samples) account for different results.

5. *Self-study review.* A review in which an author demonstrates his or her familiarity with a subject area. It is often part of an educational program or course requirement.

6. *Theoretical review.* A specialized review in which the author presents several theories or concepts focused on the same topic and compares them on the basis of assumptions, logical consistency, and scope of explanation.

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and synthesizing the results. A meta-analysis proceeds in five steps:

1. Locate all potential studies on a specific topic or research question
2. Develop consistent criteria and screen studies for relevance and/or quality
3. Identify and record relevant information for each study

4. Synthesize and analyze the information into broad findings
5. Draw summary conclusions based on the findings

For a meta-analysis of quantitative studies, relevant information in step 3 often includes sample size, measures of variables, methodological quality, and size of the effects of variables, and in step 4, this information is analyzed statistically (see Example Box 1, Meta-Analysis of Quantitative Studies). A meta-analysis of qualitative studies is a little different. The relevant information in step 3 includes qualitative descriptions that are coded into a set of categories, and in step 4 the results are synthesized qualitatively to reveal recurrent themes (see Example Box 2, Meta-Analysis of Qualitative Studies).

In addition to using meta-analysis to identify major findings across many studies, we can also use it to identify how contributors in a research case define and use major concepts. For example, Fulkerson and Thompson (2008) examined the concept of "social capital" over 18 years (1988–2006). They identified 1,218 articles in 450 academic journals with the term *social capital* in the title or abstract. They coded the articles in seven ways to define the concept and identified the "founding scholar" on the concept that the article cited. They also used statistical techniques to analyze the patterns that show use of definition across time and by specialty area.

Where to Find Research Literature

Researchers can find reports of research studies in several formats: books, scholarly journal articles, dissertations, government documents, and policy reports. Researchers also present findings as papers at the meetings of professional societies. This section discusses each format and provide a simple road map on how to access them.

Meta-analysis A special type of literature review in which a writer organizes the results from many studies and uses statistical techniques to identify common findings in them.

EXAMPLE BOX 1

Meta-Analysis of Quantitative Studies

Cheng and Chan (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 133 studies on the issue of job insecurity. Their interest was in the impact of job insecurity on health outcomes. They considered three factors: job tenure (i.e., how long a person worked at a job), age, and gender. Their purpose was to learn how job tenure, age, and gender might weaken or intensify how job insecurity influenced outcomes. First, they identified possible relevant studies by searching the keywords *job security* and *job insecurity* in several databases of studies published from 1980 to 2006. They also manually searched fifteen academic journals, searched for unpublished dissertations, and contacted leading scholars about any unpublished studies they had conducted. Next the researchers screened the potential studies using selection criteria. To be included the study, a report had to be in English, use the term *job insecurity* in a way that matched the authors' definition, report certain types of statistical results, and include all variables of interest. After they had identified 133 acceptable studies, two graduate student raters coded results from each. Information coded included sample size, measures of key variables, correlations among variables, and size of statistical effects. Next Cheng and Chan statistically analyzed the coded information. From their statistical analysis of results, the authors concluded that compared to younger and less experienced employees, older employees and those with longer job tenure experience suffered more negative physical and psychological health outcomes due to job insecurity.

EXAMPLE BOX 2

Meta-Analysis of Qualitative Studies

Marston and King (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of 268 qualitative studies published between 1990 and 2004 of young people's sexual behavior. Their interest was in how sexual behaviors among young people might influence the spread of HIV infections because almost half of all such infections occur within this age group. The authors wanted to examine qualitative studies because they were interested in what happened during a sexual encounter, reasons for the behavior, and the context of the behavior. In contrast, most quantitative studies examined only simple, isolated questions such as the percentage of young people who use condoms. They identified all studies in English published between 1990 and 2004 that provided qualitative empirical evidence about sexual relations among persons 10–25 years old. The authors included studies that concentrated on other issues (e.g., drug use) but also included sexual behavior. They searched numerous databases of articles and books and investigated the catalogs of 150 academic libraries in the United Kingdom. They found 5,452 potential reports based on a search of titles but narrowed these to 2,202 based on relevance of the title. They narrowed them further to 268 studies (246 journal articles and 22 books) based on inclusion criteria: excluding studies on child sexual abuse and commercial sex work, or those that were not available in full. They also classified documents as primary and high quality (e.g., very specific descriptions of sexual encounters with contexts) and secondary (e.g., reports of attitudes, lacking evidence for statements made). Of the 268 documents, 121 were classified as primary. Martson and King used a method of comparative thematic analysis in which they reviewed and coded the documents/studies that represented themes found in the studies (e.g., violence against women, fear of embarrassment), and then collapsed these codes into broad overall themes. They identified seven broad themes, such as gender stereotypes that were critical in determining social expectations (e.g., women, not men, should be chaste; men are expected to seek physical pleasure and women romantic love).