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Conducting a Literature Review in Political Science: Comments on Approaches, Functional Significance, Processes and Challenges in the Digital Age

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Abstract :

Literature review is an unavoidable stage in scientific research and writing. It reflects both familiarity with the stock of knowledge in a subject/topic area and scientific maturity. Unfortunately, students of political science and social sciences tend to undermine, neglect, or take this research activity for granted. There are at least two possible explanations: unawareness about its significance and the practical ways of conducting a standard literature review. This paper attempts to bring back the seriousness of conducting a literature review. It examines the functional significance of conducting the literature review, some associated challenges and possible practical ways of overcoming them. The findings indicate that cognitive awareness about the academic and social significance/function of the process is fundamental in getting students practically engaged in it. There is, therefore, a positive correlation between our capacity to conduct a literature review and our cognitive feelings of the necessity to do so. When students know that without a literature review, they may not be graded positively, they are more likely to become serious in this stage of research methodology.

Keywords: Challenges, literature review, significance, research methodology, scientific research

1. Introduction

Students of Political science and the social sciences, in general, face a challenge in conducting a standard literature review. They often tend to neglect this stage of research methodology or treat it somewhat sparsely. One of the reasons could be that they are not adequately familiar with the knowledge of conducting a literature review and/or the complexity of the process.¹ However, a literature review is a critical stage in scientific research as it reflects the degree of scientific maturity and familiarity with the subject area. As part of the research methodology, the literature review is an unavoidable stage in research writing in both the social and hard sciences. There is, therefore, a need for students to be familiar with what it is all about and how to go about it. The paper argues that, like any other stage in research methodology, a literature review is an unavoidable and indispensable stage. It is distinctive in the sense that it has its principles, which, when respected and applied, could conjure up to complement research properly. It may also have some challenges; however, familiarity with the scientific significance and knowledge of how to go about it could address the challenges.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the challenges encountered in the literature review stage of scientific research and how they can be potentially addressed. To do so, it examines the problems associated with the literature review process, its function and significance in scientific research, and ways of going about it. Examples are taken from the field of social sciences, and specifics are from political science. In the social sciences, the unit of analysis is usually the action of humans in a given setting in society. Political science focuses on the political actions and inactions of humans and institutions. The audience targeted in this paper includes students who intend to or are called on to write literature reviews for their long essays and dissertations and whose previous training might not have prepared them for this. Career researchers are also concerned about this paper as it may refresh their memory on some basics of the literature review. Academic supervisors are also concerned about it as it is an important part of the academic supervision process they must care about and closely monitor. Overall, the paper is intended for anyone who needs to learn the conventions of writing academic papers, as Galvan and Galvan (2017: XVI) put it.

¹ A Literature review is also known as one of the complex processes in research methodology. See Galvan, J.L. and Galvan M.C's (2017) Writing literature reviews: A guide for students of the social and behavioral sciences, Seventh edition, Routledge, New York, p. xv.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Literature and/Or Literature Review

Literature and literature review are key concepts in this paper. Unfortunately, in some cases, they are used interchangeably to mean almost the same thing—state of knowledge and documentation in a subject/topic area. They, therefore, need some clarification. *Literature* is distinct from *the literature review*. *The literature* describes the sum of documentation in a subject/topic area, while the *literature review* is a process. *Literature* is a noun used to describe the stock of knowledge or documentation in a given subject/topic area, while *literature review* is a verb—reflecting the action of identifying and exploiting literature or documentation in a subject/topic area. Literature is what is known or what exists about a subject/topic, and a literature review is *getting to* know what is known or what exists in that subject/topic. The existing documentation could be written, oral, audio, filed, tape, video, etc. *Literature* was primarily used to describe works of art derived from our creative imagination, and this includes songs, poetry, drama, fiction, nonfiction, etc. In its original Latin connotation, *literature* is used to describe any material that could have been written or spoken. An Online version of the Cambridge Dictionary also finds in literature "written artistic works". It goes further to think of literature as "all information related to a subject, especially information written by experts", "printed material..." and "writing that has lasting value as arts".² All these definitions have two precisions: they consider literature to be a *noun* as it describes a 'thing', and that thing is *information* usually in a written form but also in other forms. That 'thing' is also used to describe a course or subject studied in institutions of learning. This is the case when we talk of French literature, English literature, and literature in English. Nevertheless, I distinguish between scientific kinds of literature, which can also be called epistemology, and other kinds of literature. Scientific literature comprises the stock of reviewed books and articles on a subject area, and this is quite different from the stock of other sources of knowledge, such as newspapers and media reports.

A *literature review* is a phrasal verb that describes the human action of reading to exploit literature or information for academic goal requirements. We do a literature review to be up-to-date with knowledge and information about a subject/topic. This epistemological and academic understanding of the literature review reveals a technical and procedural dimension of the action. It locates literature reviews in a specific setting — the academic setting, where they belong- and seems to inform that it is a significant and indispensable process in academia. Other scholars have supported this understanding of literature review by seeing it almost from the same angle. Ridley talks of literature review as a process of searching for relevant work done by others.³ The use of 'process' emphasizes the action-driven dimension of the concept. However, Ridley seems to believe that the concept ends with the search for relevant work and not the search and academic exploitation of "relevant work", as I have thought of earlier. Ridley, nevertheless, pursues:

The 'literature review' is part of the thesis where there is extensive reference to related research and theory in your field; it is where connections are made between the source texts that you draw on and where you position yourself and your research among these sources. It is your opportunity to engage in a written dialogue with researchers in your area while at the same time showing that you have engaged with, understood, and responded to the relevant body of knowledge underpinning your research.⁴

This definition carries interesting aspects. It finds literature review to be an academic activity, thereby locating it in its proper sphere. It is not only an academic activity but also, and perhaps most importantly, an academic socialization activity — as it provides the space for connection between scholars of related subject/topic fields. Ridley also makes use of the term "extensive reference" to certainly emphasize the importance of the activity. The last but certainly not the least aspect we tap into from the definition is its ability to reveal the outreach dimension of the literature review. The definition talks of the "opportunity...[of] showing that you have engaged with, understood and responded to the relevant body of knowledge underpinning your research."

However, in most of the definitions examined, authors seem to agree that literature review has something to do with research connectivity (connecting with others), what others have written and said about what you want to write, and extensive documentation. The literature review is part of a research process that involves looking back to identify and explore what others have written about what we want to write. It is that retrospective process in research inviting the researcher to look back and ask: 'What have others written about this subject?'

Overall two approaches have sustained our understanding of literature review: I call them purpose-driven and process-driven approaches. A purpose-driven definition focuses on defining a literature review by focusing on its aim or purpose. In other words, we define literature review by looking at what it aims to achieve rather than how it intends to achieve it. Examples of purpose-driven definitions of the literature review are the following:

- To provide the background to and justification for the research undertaken (Bruce 1994:218)
- To locate the research project from its context or background and provide insights into previous work (Blaxter et al., 2010:124)
- To demonstrate a fully professional grasp of background theory to your subject (Philips & Pugh, 2010:64)

Regarding the process-driven definition, the literature review is generally understood as a process, otherwise an activity in research. An example of a process-driven definition of a literature review could be:

Extract and synthesize the main points, issues, and research methods that emerge from a critical review of the readings (Nunan 1992:217)

² Cambridge Dictionary, "literature" <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/literature>, accessed April 5, 2022.

³ Ridley, 2012:14.

⁴ Ibid: 16.

Purpose-driven	Process/Action-driven	Purpose & Process-driven
To provide the background to and justification for the research undertaken.	Extract and synthesize the main points, issues, and research methods that emerge from a critical review of the readings.	To read and understand others' works concerning yours to distinguish where yours is similar to or different from theirs.
To locate the research project from its context or background and provide insights into previous work.		
To demonstrate a fully professional grasp of background theory to your subject.		

Table 1: Comparing Purpose-driven and Process-driven Definitions of Literature Review
Source: Author, 2022

A literature review is also a chapter/section/part in a dissertation, thesis, write-up, article, and/or textbook that identifies and describes works that are related to a subject/topic of research investigation. If there are at least two angles from which a literature review can be understood and defined, that also means that there is more than a single approach to a literature review.

3. Approaches to Literature Review

In ten years of research experience, I have been able to develop at least two approaches to literature review—that is, angles from which literature review has been tackled. I call them the *epistemological* and *thematic* approaches. The *epistemological* approach to the literature review is a somewhat chronological and logical presentation of the works of others, beginning from the most recent works (so to speak) to the earliest ones. It is a presentation of the origin and development of the stock of knowledge in a given subject/topic. It permits a succinct observation of the continuities and discontinuities in the treatment given to a social phenomenon by scholars. It pays attention to the chronological effect of time on a chosen subject/topic. This approach could be appropriate for longer-term research and research investigating common topics for which many works exist. With the *epistemological* approach, we see the development of a social phenomenon scientifically. That is how scientific research has treated a social phenomenon from when it was first identified as the object of scientific research. A researcher who adopts this approach is likely, to begin with the works of classical scholars and through to modern and contemporary ones. For example, in Political science, we may be interested in studying the practice of democracy and the stability of political systems in a given political system. This investigation could be guided by the following research question: Why does democracy make some political systems more stable and others not? The *epistemological* approach requires us to start with the works of pioneer authors who first developed a scientific interest in democracy and the stability of political systems. Specifically, this will mean that...we examine the works of Aristotle, Cicero, Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Montesquieu's *Democracy in America*, Robert Dahl's *On Democracy*, Joseph Schumpeter, etc. This will enable us to capture the various meanings given to the concept, the continuities and discontinuities of the concept, and so on, all in a chronological, logical, and systematic manner. If we have to study the role of the elite in democracy, we may begin with an interest in the works of Gaetano Mosca's *The Ruling Class*, Vilfredo Pareto's *The Rise and Fall of Elites*, Robert Michel's *Iron Law of oligarchy*, Wright Mills' *Power Elite* and finally contemporary works on elites.

The second approach — the *thematic* approach to the literature review, is concerned with selecting and treating variables separately as distinct yet related aspects of the subject/topic in the literature. Often, students distinguish 'review by theories' from 'review by concepts'. This can also be classified as a thematic approach. The thematic approach, however, has a problem. It may be hard to dissociate the variables of the topic. Some variables may be difficult to be treated separately. Variables in research are said to be interconnected, and when we separate and treat them as such in the literature, we may cause confusion. Nevertheless, the thematic approach is an easy way of organizing and classifying aspects of the research topic in literature. With a thematic approach, we select the key variables in the research topic and discuss them. For example, if we are interested in the study of democracy in the Third World, we may decide to break down the concept of democracy into smaller variables that can be treated separately as themes. Some works could have chosen to treat democracy as the organization of free and fair elections. In this case, the theme could be written down as democracy as the organization of free and fair elections. Here, interest and focus are on those works that have examined democracy from this angle. We could have as many themes as possible in the concept of democracy that literature has treated. This also means that the thematic approach could be suited for topics with key variables that have been treated from various angles. Democracy is a concept with different variations and dimensions in Political science. This means that when dealing with it, a researcher needs to be wary enough about which literature review approach is best.

Overall, the approach to the literature review is sometimes determined by the nature of the subject/topic and by the degree of convenience a researcher may find in a particular approach. A combination of both the *epistemological* and *thematic* approaches is, however, possible. A literature review can be fragmented into themes, and each theme is treated chronologically and logically.

4. Significances and Functions of Literature Review

Knowing what we gain from a literature review is fundamental in determining our ability to engage in the process. A literature review fulfills certain functions. Although, in most cases, it focuses on the academic function, it also fulfills some functions that are more or less distant from academic expectations. I have classified the functions of a literature review into two main categories: the academic function and the social function.

4.1. The Academic Function of Literature Review

The academic function comprises the technical and practical aspects of the literature review. It is also immediate and short-term. It is specific in character and a problem-solving tool in the preliminary stages of research. Some academic functions are to fulfill research methodology requirements, discover new variables, and compare and familiarize with theories and concepts.

A primary function of a literature review is to fulfill scientific research methodology requirements. This function could also be considered the methodological function of the literature review. A literature review is a fundamental stage in scientific research that is unavoidable and must be done if a scientific piece is of acceptable scientific standard. By this, I also mean that there is a technical aspect of the literature review, which is *about identifying and filling gaps in research methodology*. To capture this function, Johnson and Joslyn (1989:121) provide six practical and technical reasons for the literature review as follows:

- To develop general explanations for observed variations in behavior or phenomenon;
- To identify potential relationships between concepts and to identify researchable hypotheses;
- To learn how others have defined and measured key concepts;
- To identify data sources that other researchers have used;
- To develop alternative research designs and
- To discover how a research project is related to the work of others.

A literature review is technically useful in research as it is part of the methods through which we can solve the problem of copyrighting/plagiarism and, more generally, repetition. It is used to measure originality and contribution to knowledge. Similarly, the literature review enables us to answer unanswered questions or answer them in a new way or again test untested hypotheses. In this light, a literature review project may be designed to answer an 'old' question in a new way (Johnson & Joslyn, 1989:122). The works of others are a source of motivation to discover new questions and untested hypotheses about a phenomenon or behavior. As a problem-solving instrument, a literature review supports the identification of the research problem and perhaps shows there is a gap in research.

In another academic dimension, the literature review is a research instrument used to *discover new variables* in scientific research. A political and perhaps other social phenomenon is not usually caused by a single variable. There may be, and often there are other variables that cause it. Often, researchers begin with a simple hypothesis that specifies the relationship between two variables. Upon doing a thorough literature review, they discovered other variables they could use to reinforce their preliminary hypothesis. The following passage from Johnson and Joslyn (1989:122) illustrates somewhat understand what I mean:

...suppose a researcher hypothesized that people become active in politics because they have some serious dissatisfaction with government policy. A review of the literature on political participation might show that participation is related to years of formal education, attitudes of civic duty, and beliefs in one's own ability to affect political affairs.

Apart from the dissatisfaction policy, the literature review has revealed three other independent variables/explanations of participation. These include level of academic qualification, politically active citizenry, and feelings of political efficacy. The researcher may therefore not afford to exclude these other three variables which will be necessary for the research design. They will enable the researcher to measure the degree of influence over participation. These other three explanations can be called competing variables. A literature review enables us to discover competing variables.

Among the key significant usages and functions of the literature review is that it compares concepts and theories. According to Johnson and Joslyn (1989:122), using the same definitions of a concept as other researchers will lead to greater comparability of research findings on the same topic. That may not be all to gain from the comparative function of the literature review. A literature review can improve the validity of a researcher's measures. This is particularly true when we discover that other researchers' definitions of a concept are ambiguous. A typical example would be researching democratic attitudes and behaviors. Although there could be some agreed-upon measures of democracy, a literature review of that concept has revealed a wide variety of its understanding and application across political systems. So, if our research finding shows that the concept is somewhat differently interpreted from existing literature, this increases the validity of our research by reinforcing the idea that it is an ambiguous concept. A literature review can also inform us that a definition we have used for a concept is narrow. Otherwise, if we do not do a literature review, we may be limited to a narrow definition of a concept, and this may invalidate our research.

Academically, a literature review acts to *enhance and consolidate familiarity with concepts and theories*. At the end of a well-conducted literature review, the researcher is likely to become familiar with concepts and theories in the area of research interest. The more we read about what others have written, the more familiar we become with the concepts, theories, and terminologies used in the subject/topic. This is another way of saying that literature review is somewhat the foundation on which we can humbly lay claim over expertise in a particular subject field or research area. To show that we have mastered a subject/field, we need to display as much of the knowledge/findings of others in that subject/field area as

we can. The more we can display such know-how, the more easily and likely we tend to see ourselves and be appreciated by our peers as masters of that domain. Thus, the literature review can earn us a sense of scientific reputation that could go beyond the boundaries of what was originally limited to a research topic. Academic experience is also achieved through a literature review.

4.2. Social Functions of Literature Review

Literature review shapes academic and social behavior as it is a process that initiates and sustains us in the academic milieu and beyond. A literature review allows researchers to benefit from past experiences and best practices in academia.⁵ *Academic socialization* is also a secondary function of the literature review. It is a live process of interaction with other scholars. From this perspective, the literature review takes us out of academic isolationism.

An important function of the literature review is its social and reputational dimension. Academia is also a measure of socio-economic status so the higher the educational level, the more we become viewed and considered as members of a high socio-economic status group in society. We acquire scholarly experience and reputation when we review the works of others. Reviewing their work is a way of making oneself known to academic peers and the broader public. A literature review is also a symbol of *academic humility*. A literature review is used to acknowledge the academic contribution and support of others. By reviewing and acknowledging the work of others, we show that, academically, we are humble. When we conduct a thorough literature review on a subject/topic, we demonstrate that we are not the only ones in that research area—as we acknowledge and recognize the work of others through it. When the works of others are not duly reviewed and acknowledged, it will look as though we intend to hold a claim of originality for a subject/topic, probably meaning an expression of academic pride that may not be welcomed by peer researchers.

When we talk about the work of others, we gain recognition and appreciation. We also make them academically proud, relevant, and qualified. Academic citations and the citations of academic works have partly become the measuring rod of the degree of academic popularity among scholars. The more your work has been cited, even if it is limited to the literature review section, the more academically popular and relevant you become. A feeling of academic job satisfaction could also be gained through the literature review framework.

5. The Literature Review Process

All along, we have been interested in the 'what' and 'why' questions about literature review. That is what it is all about and why it is necessary. We now focus on the 'how' question, otherwise known as the operational phase of the literature review. How we conduct a literature review in the proper sense is what forms the backbone of this section. I identify four basic phases of the literature review process: the identification phase, extraction phase, classification/arrangement phase, and writing proper phase.

5.1. The Identification Phase

Some scholars have thought that how well we conduct a literature review depends on two factors: the main purpose of the review and the stage of development of the research topic (Johnson & Joslyn, 1989:125). If we are starting with a general interest in a subject, so they argue, then it is proper to begin by *locating a textbook and/or article covering the subject*. Indeed, it could be cumbersome and time-consuming to read through an entire textbook, especially a voluminous one. There could even be situations where nearly all that is found in the textbook is of some interest to us, in which case we may be compelled to go through the entire book. However, that is hardly ever the case—we will always have areas/sections/chapters in the textbook of more interest than others. That is where we have to pay attention. In any case, Johnson and Joslyn (1989:125) propose that we must be able to read the appropriate sections and then check out the sources cited in the footnotes/endnotes and/or reference list. The sources cited could be a useful reference for getting other relevant textbooks/materials. I call this the *snowball strategy* in the literature review. By this, I mean the use of a textbook or other written material to identify other material which might qualify for review.

Another way to go about a specific knowledge search will be to search in the textbook keywords of our research topic or area. This can always be found in the glossary, towards the last pages of the textbook, for those textbooks with glossaries. It is an easy way of conducting a literature review, given that it is fast and less time-consuming. Nevertheless, it should be noted that not all textbooks have glossaries to make it easy, and even where there is a glossary, some of them could be missing out on the keywords we are after. On other occasions, we may well find a keyword, but it may not be aptly explained in the textbook. Textbooks with or without a glossary may have and often do have the keyword appearing as titles/sections/subsections in the table of contents with appropriate reference to the page. Like keywords in the list of a glossary, titles/sections/subsections in the table of contents have specific references to the page number. Once we then find the page number, we switch to the page(s) to get the information we need. Also, articles in journals do not always have glossaries. However, compared to the textbook, they are less voluminous and can easily be read through. The snowball strategy could also be applied in an article.

The search for keywords/concepts/theories or so in the textbook has been made easy with digital textbooks. Some textbooks in PDF format offer the possibility of entering a word in the search box, and once the search button is clicked, we are taken everywhere that word is found in the digital textbook. However, not all textbooks in digital format have this facility. If we wish to go in this way, we must be sure to have a constant flow of energy and data on our device to ensure the serenity of our research.

⁵ The SAGE handbook of social media research methods..., p.83.

Appropriate textbooks and articles can be found on onsite and online library platforms. Onsite libraries contain a subject card catalog that can be used to identify books that address our topic. The librarian could be of significant assistance to the researcher at this level. The researcher needs to contact the librarian and present the topic, and the librarian will do the rest. Regarding online search, there are online libraries (some with free access and others payable) that contain as many as a thousand textbooks and articles. A catalog system may not be needed for this. Rather, the researcher is expected to type the title of the textbook, keyword, subject field, or so in the search box, and the deal is done! Most of the online textbooks are in PDF format and can be downloaded free of charge or against charges.

A classical and still relevant way of starting with a literature review is to discuss the topic of research with a friend, mate, and/or supervisor and even request their help on how and where to get appropriate documentation. Often, some students/researchers may not want to disclose their topic/research to others for reasons best known to them—but unless we already have where to get our documentation, then it is advisable to discuss our topic with others so that they can give an orientation on how to get material. Some colleagues/mates can even lend their documentation to us. Why not! It is important not to discriminate against documentation, i.e., try to be very selective or try to be too general about documentation. As Johnson and Joslyn (1989:126) write, "a thorough literature search includes anything published on your topic in professional journals, magazines, books, newspapers, government publications and documents, and conference proceedings", and they could be found both onsite and online. Galvan and Galvan (2017) also suggest that we need to be interested in primary sources, which are empirical research reports published in academic journals, theoretical articles, literature review articles, anecdotal reports, and reports on professional practices and standards.⁶

Perhaps it is important to raise the issue of 'fake' online documents and materials. The emergence of social media and the uncontrolled ease with which people make use of them and believe in whatever information they find there should be of concern to researchers. Here and there on social media, we find government publications in the form of decrees, decisions, etc, that are later declared fake. It is in the researcher's place to exercise more caution when dealing with online documentation. This is not, however, to say that classical documentation is to be more authentic than online, but classical documents have the least chance of being fake than online. Perhaps it is also important to distinguish between junk online documentation and relevant/authentic one. This will, however, be seen from the way our online sources are cited either in the footnote or reference list. Information obtained online must have an author, a title, a website, and the date accessed. Any information obtained online without an author, a title or so is no less than junk information that can be written by anyone.

5.2. The Extraction Phase

After identifying the relevant documentation, we extract the relevant information. This phase consists of *jotting down* or *recording* (usually in writing) the relevant information. It is in this phase that we read with a concentration on familiarizing ourselves with the content and being able to extract relevant information. Once we read through the document, we then take notes and take down what information we find relevant for review. During this phase, we must be guided by at least the following questions: What does this work say about my topic (for example, about why people participate in politics)? This question is too general, though! A specific one could be: How is participation defined in this work? What has the work said that has not been said by others (for example, the strengths of the work)? What has not been said in this work that has been said in others and why? What are the methodological strengths and weaknesses? How different is the idea and finding of this work from others? How useful is the information? How will it help in my research? How is the work different from or similar to what I am writing?

5.3. The Classification or Organization Phase

Note that during the extraction phase we read and jot down information according to our objective somewhat randomly. For example, on a single sheet of paper, we find information on the definition of participation, causes of participation, limits of participation, participation resources, and the like. In the classification phase, we get to a somewhat *organized arrangement* of the information. They could be classified according to themes (theories and concepts), variables (dependent or independent), authors (classical or modern), etc. I will suggest the use of note cards or spreadsheets to classify the information because they are practical and can easily be manipulated. However, they could also get missing easily. Each notecard or a set of note cards could address a particular theme. For example, a set can be devoted to definitions of participation,⁷ another for causes of participation, and still another for limits of participation, and so on. Sometimes, note cards have different colors, and each color can represent an aspect or theme related to the topic of research.

5.4. The Writing Proper Phase

Following my classification, this is the last, however, not the least of the literature review phases. It involves the final writing of the literature review, as it will have to appear in your research report. If it is a master's or doctorate thesis, it will have to appear as a chapter. If it is a research or academic article, it appears as a section or paragraph, and so on. In any case, this is where a logical presentation of the relevant information is done. The aim here is to come up with a coherent and well-structured stock of knowledge regarding your research topic in literature. We hope to see coherent

⁶ For details on each of these, see Galvan, J.L. and Galvan, M.C (2017), chapter 1.

⁷ I use definition here to mean 'authoritative definitions' i.e., definitions offered by experts that can be quoted or summarized and not definitions taken from secondary sources such as dictionaries and/or encyclopedias.

linkages between variables in the various works (for example, linkages in various definitions of participation), providing explanations for the orientation chosen by other authors, explaining statistical differences and approaches, etc. Attention is given to the neatness, coherence of presentation, justification, and analysis of main points, contextualization of research, and finally, what I call the *boundary of originality*. The boundary of originality is that set of sentences or paragraphs in the literature review section stipulating how the researcher's work differs from that of others. It is here that contribution to knowledge is brought out. It is here that the researcher is expected to scientifically demarcate work from others. The boundary of originality can appear in the last paragraph of the literature review. However, it can also come as broken sentences after the review of one or two works in the body of the literature review. It is here that the scientific precision and concision of the researcher are measured as he/she is expected to state, without ambiguity, the difference or sameness of his/her work about others.

It is in this stage that we make use of literature review terminologies. Certain expressions are specific to the literature review. The stock of language in the literature review ranges from simple to complex expressions. Words/sentences/phrases such as: according to..., author 'x' or 'y' have studied and discovered that..., analyzed..., findings reveal..., author argues that..., the approach of..., the strength/weakness of argument is/are... there is a correlation; the work is linked to others/ mine in that..., author (s) support argument by..., etc., are specific to the literature review.

Of how many words, signs, and/or pages should a literature review comprise? This question is ubiquitous because there is no conventional or agreed-upon length so far. There are many factors at play in the length of the literature review. Sometimes, the decision about the length is left to the individual researcher, who can agree with the supervisor. Some institutions and departments/faculties have pre-established lengths for literature review. Students are advised to inquire before they start writing. The level of the study and the kind of study are also determinants. It is hoped that the higher the level of studies, the greater the length. A bachelor's end-of-year report (Long essay) will not have the same length as an MSc or PhD report because the requirements are relatively less complex⁸, with a shorter period of submission. In the absence of a formal rule governing the length of a research project, specifically a literature review, the researcher is left to determine what the length could be. This could, in turn, be influenced by the length of the overall research project, which is sometimes determined by the department through rules or by customary practice through mimicry. A Ph.D. thesis has an approximate average length of 70-80,000 words. Now, if all chapters have to be balanced and there are always five chapters, and if there is any chapter on literature review, then, if we divide 80,000 by five, we will have approximately 16,000 words of literature review for a PhD.

Ridley (2012) distinguished between two kinds of review that can affect the length of a literature review: a stand-alone review, which is a self-contained literature review on a particular topic that could be conducted for an undergraduate or postgraduate module assignment and a systematic review—a professional and rigorous undertaking which synthesizes findings from a sizeable number of individual studies (Ridley, 2012: 5). It is thus understood that a stand-alone review will be shorter in length compared to a systematic review. At both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, students are given assignments in the form of topics for research on an individual or collective basis. These are stand-alone activities that may review stand-alone reviews, which will be limited in length. The length is often measured in terms of the number of words, signs, and pages. However, the number of words is among the most regular measurements of length. The font size can influence the number of pages so that the bigger the size required, the greater the number of pages.

It is at this stage that we also know that a quality review has been done. We know this when an entire section is devoted to it in research, well-known authors of the subject area have been examined, and the number of references within the subject area in the reference/sources consulted/bibliographical list at the end of the report is many, and all of them have been appropriately cited at least once in the research.

6. A Note on Challenges of Literature Review and Possible Ways Out

We have initially written that the literature review shows how similar our research is to others and/or what makes the difference between our work and that of others. This also means that we must be able to reveal the originality of our work only after a rigorous review of the works of others in a similar research domain. When we find that we are different from others at the end of research, we develop a sense of satisfaction because we have done something others have not done or been able to do. A literature review can also discourage us from continuing with a particular topic. The literature review can discontinue research. It could be one of the most frustrating experiences and stages in research. This is particularly true when we find that the topic we have originally chosen to write on has been widely covered so much that we feel there is nothing new we can add, and that becomes frustrating. It can even be a reason to switch topic areas. Now, what if, after the due review process, we discover that there is significantly nothing new our research will bring to knowledge? What if we find, through literature review, that our original topic of research has been widely covered with theories, concepts, ideas, and results that we expect to have? The purpose of scientific research, among others, is to discover general rules on people's behavior in society. However, if research were to be limited to that, then any first explanation of human behavior would be adopted as applicable to all humans regardless of conditions and contexts. It is not the case! Research also aims to discover exceptions to pre-established scientific rules, and it is possible to do so through a literature review. That is also why a literature review has been specifically designed as part of the research. There is always a practical and theoretical chance that our work differs from that of others in some way. There might be similarities, but the similarities will seldom be one hundred percent. It is specifically that difference between our work and that of others that makes us feel that we have contributed to knowledge. That is why, after having an idea of our research

⁸ BA/BSc reports are essentially descriptive, topic-focused, and most indicative of the main current topic with less analysis required.

topic, we instantly feel that it is original, that the idea is ours and that no one would have covered that area of research so that the results of our findings show that we are the pioneer and our work is original. However, when we get into the literature review, we may be surprised at the volume of documentation in that area of research. Sometimes, we get frustrated at seeing that there is nothing new we will be able to add. Then, instead of pushing on, we start thinking about changing our research topic. Many students have fallen into this, and sometimes they have done so with their supervisors. It is common for some supervisors to sweepingly tell supervisees to change their topics on the grounds that a lot has been written and done in that area of research. A rigorous and thorough literature review will instead enable us to think about redesigning our topic, our methodology, and so on. As Johnson and Joslyn (1989:121) put it, a review of previous research will help sharpen our research topic by familiarizing the researcher with the major research questions that have been asked by others. Thus, we should not be discouraged and discontinue research when we discover that a lot has been written about the research area we have chosen to investigate.

Almost all aspects of human life have been covered by scientific research, or at least an attempt has been made to do so. In political science, almost all aspects of politics (including the study of power) have been covered, and we can say that there is no taboo subject of study in political science. Does that mean that we should not go about studying them or that we should not review them? Even when we want to know which aspects have been covered or not, we need a literature review. Human behavior and social phenomenon are not standard, unchangeable, inert, and stagnant aspects of life. They are constantly subjected to change and we cannot afford to study the influence of the changes on patterns of behavior on the pretext that they have been studied.

Academic plagiarism is another challenge to quality review. It is quite easy to have access to documentation online, download them, and comfortably read them. There is a risk of copying and pasting material in our work so that what we have at the end is more of somebody else's work. Plagiarism is a significant threat to quality review as our intention is just to copy what others have said about our area of research without acknowledging them and, most importantly, show how their work relates to ours. There are cases where students google a particular topic, and as the material appears, they just copy and paste it without reading, thinking their problem is solved. No! That is not how it is done. There are also cases where students copy and paste pre-existing literature on a subject area and think that it is all done and over for that stage of research. Again, I say no! To stay away from the trap of what is convenient to call online plagiarism, students are required to take quality time off to read any material obtained online, extract the most important information that directly relates to their work, present it and acknowledge it. This means that for any online material to be reviewed, it must have a source (author, title, date, publisher, website, and date accessed online).

7. Conclusion

A literature review is an indispensable stage in scientific research and writing. In this paper, an effort was made to understand what literature review is all about, approaches to the literature review, its functions and significance, practical ways to go about it, some challenges encountered, and possible ways of overcoming the challenges. A scientific piece of work without a thorough review is no more than anything else except science. Literature review updates us about existing concepts, theories, and findings in our research domain and, perhaps most importantly, distinguishes our research from others. However, to go about this, we must be able to locate the appropriate source documentation (both onsite and online) and make good use of it while exercising scientific caution. We must also be able to extract and arrange relevant information in a way that is coherent and logical so that there is a clear demarcation between our work and that of others. Understandably, the literature review is demanding, particularly when we discover that much has been documented on a chosen topic. We must not be discouraged! We must fulfill the demand, and to do so, we must think about the academic and social opportunities we achieve through it.

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