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Writing Literature Reviews in Church-Based Research

David R. Dunaetz, Editor

Abstract

Because of the knowledge explosion taking place, literature reviews in church-based research are needed more than ever. Summaries and syntheses of previous research make this knowledge available to practitioners and help researchers focus on what remains unknown. In contrast to empirical studies, literature reviews rely on previously published studies to make conclusions and advance theory. These studies may include both church-based research and more general research that is not particularly Christian. In contrast to meta-analyses which focus on synthesizing statistical information, literature reviews focus on conceptual synthesis and theory advancement. To write a literature review, authors must first choose a research problem to address. An initial review of past literature will help them focus on a narrower research question, most likely in an iterative process, to choose a specific topic. The authors must also consider the purpose of their review in light of past research and theoretical contributions that they can make to the chosen topic.

The knowledge explosion of the last several decades has produced unprecedented quantities of evidence-based research, including research that is relevant to evangelism, disciple making, and virtually all church-based ministries (Cooper, 1988; Dunaetz, 2020a; Grant & Booth, 2009). In the social sciences and other fields that focus on understanding humans (e.g., church-based research), the explosion is especially notable because of the complexity of human behavior (Adair & Vohra, 2003). Most empirical studies in these fields focus on a very specific phenomenon, resulting in a broad range of studies, each touching on a narrow aspect of how humans act in different situations and contexts. Since the 1980s, researchers have been overloaded with information, resulting in an increased sense of need for literature reviews that summarize and synthesize the many streams of research in a given field (Cooper, 1988). Literature reviews not only play an essential role in the dissemination of research, but they also help researchers avoid unnecessary duplication of effort and allow them to build upon the work of those who have gone before them (Bordens & Abbott, 2011).

A literature review that summarizes and synthesizes research can provide the reader with an easily accessible overview of the advances that have occurred in a field, for example, Fapohunda's (2021) review of the theological literature on integrity and evangelism. This summary and synthesis approach may be the most common approach taken by scholars in seminaries and theological schools. But literature reviews can also provide a bridge between specialized fields, such as linking research in organizational psychology and church-based research. For example, literature reviews have been used to summarize research on organizational justice (the perception of being fairly or unfairly treated; Colquitt et al., 2001; Cropanzano & Ambrose, 2015) that can be applied to Christian organizations (Dunaetz, 2010) and to church planting (Dunaetz, 2020b). This is similar to Augustine's use of platonic philosophy for Christian purposes in accord with Scripture, described with the metaphor of the Israelites plundering the Egyptians during the Exodus (Augustine, 397, Book 2, Chapter 40). In addition, literature reviews may be undertaken in preparation for additional research (Grant & Booth, 2009; Paré et al., 2015). A review can identify gaps that exist in our knowledge of a topic. These gaps can form the basis of research questions.

With the general purposes of literature reviews in mind, we can address some of the steps involved in writing literature reviews that will be beneficial to both researchers and practitioners.

Choosing a Topic

Before writing a literature review, researchers must begin with a topic that they consider important. In church-based research, this topic may come from personal experiences (e.g., Hilderbrand, 2022, in this issue), previous research that piqued the author's interest, theories that seem relevant to ministry, or from real-life problems (Bordens & Abbott, 2011). Concern about deconversions (Streib, 2021), ethics and evangelism (Fapohunda, 2021), measuring church attendance (Smith, 1998), and the meaning of church health (Huizing, 2012) have all led to literature reviews relevant to ministry.

But a topic should not be studied and reviewed simply because it has been researched previously. A good literature review, as with all solid research, will address a research problem, some problem that does not yet have a definitive solution and is considered important by at least some people. The research problem should not be something trivial or a simple repeat of what has been addressed previously. The problem should be of manageable size so that any answers or hypotheses that emerge from the literature review can be tested (Salkind, 2017). Yet the research problem should be important enough to justify the effort needed to find a solution.

Once the research problem is at least tentatively identified, one or more research questions can be formed (Bordens & Abbott, 2011; Dunaetz, 2020c; Salkind, 2017). A research question is a question whose answer will at least provide a partial solution to the research problem. The answer to a research question might not solve the research problem completely, but it at least contributes some knowledge relevant to the problem, even if it raises more questions than it answers.

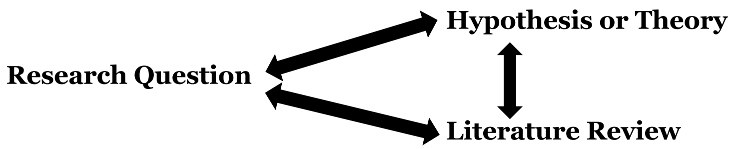
A good research question needs to be answerable (Bordens & Abbott, 2011). This often means that an answer can be developed empirically, that is, collectible data should conceivably provide evidence for a valid answer to the research question. Although purely philosophical research questions may be addressed without data, most answers to church-focused research questions are more convincing when data exists. At the broadest level, this data might be what biblical texts say about the topic, or what theologians have said about it. But for more practical problems, qualitative and quantitative data are likely to provide new insights into specific church-based phenomena in contemporary contexts. A literature review should not just cover the theological aspects of a research question, but also the empirical studies that have been conducted. Qualitative church-based studies tend to collect data from interviews (e.g., Moon, 2020) or from ethnographic observations (e.g., Ward, 2015). Quantitative church-based studies tend to collect data from surveys (e.g., Bocala-Wiedemann, 2022, in this issue).

A good research question will also provide the rationale for a literature review. It will address some need that is felt by others rather than simply be an expression of the author's interest or curiosity. It will be presented in such a way as to explain why this is an important question, relevant to people's lives either in or outside of the Christian community. It will also be framed in such a way as to address existing contradictions or holes in the church-based literature (Torraco, 2005).

A literature review addressing a research question will not simply be a summary of previous research. Rather, it will lead to something new, such as a hypothesis that can be tested, a theory that integrates the previous research, or a proposal for additional research to address what the existing literature cannot address. However, we often do not begin research with a literature review. We tend to start with a research question, and based on our experience, we come up with a hypothesis. Then we conduct a literature review based on the variables or phenomena found in our hypothesis. We tend to think that this will be a linear process (Dunaetz, 2020c):

Research Question ➡ Hypothesis or Theory ➡ Literature Review

However, this is not a linear process. Once we examine the literature, we often discover something that will modify the research question or the hypothesis, perhaps several times. Developing a research question, hypothesis, and literature is often an iterative process, which can be better represented as:



This nonlinear process can be frustrating, often leading to major revisions in both our thinking and our manuscript. However, it is a necessary process to fully integrate the literature into our thinking and to produce a valuable literature review that can provide useful information (Salkind, 2017).

Writing the Literature Review

The Structure Depends on the Purpose

The purpose of the literature review will greatly influence both the structure of the review and the choice of literature to include (Bem, 1995). For example, if the author is trying to summarize competing models or theories (e.g., missional communities, Urton, 2022, in this issue) to make a conclusion about the best or most relevant in a given situation or to propose a better one, the literature review will be structured around the various models or theories.

If the author's goal is to promote a specific or novel view (e.g., Davison, 2022, in this issue), the author might begin with a description of the conventional view and why it is widely accepted. The author may then explore studies that either support or do not support the conventional view. The author may then synthesize this information, making either an improvement to the conventional view or presenting a new, more comprehensive view.

If the purpose of a review is to lead up to a testable hypothesis, then the review may be structured around the two or more variables invoked in the hypothesis. For each variable, the various definitions that are found in the literature, the demonstrated antecedents of that variable, and the demonstrated consequences of that variable should be reviewed. The conclusion of the review should logically lead to the hypothesis to be tested. For example, if an initial review of the relevant literature leads to the hypothesis, "The greater the cultural homogeneity, the faster a newly planted church will grow, especially when the age of the members is relatively low," the three variables to include in the review would be cultural homogeneity, church growth, and the age of church members.

To structure the review so that it logically leads to the hypothesis to be tested, the reviewer can begin (after an appropriate introduction presenting the research problem or question) with an in-depth discussion of cultural homogeneity (and its opposite, cultural diversity). This would include discussing the various definitions and measures of cultural diversity, specifying the definition and operationalization (a way it can be measured) chosen for this study. The review would also include the research that has uncovered antecedents (e.g., causes) of cultural homogeneity or diversity and the research that has uncovered consequences (e.g., results) of cultural homogeneity or diversity. The literature review should not be limited to the research done on cultural homogeneity in the church but should cover the whole range of literature that may be relevant. After reviewing cultural diversity, the author should include similarly structured sections on church growth and the age of church members. All three concepts should be logically tied together in the conclusion, resulting in a hypothesis that can be tested empirically.

The logic of a literature review for such a study can be summarized roughly in broad terms as "There's a problem with A. It appears to be related to B and C. Here's what we know about A (its definition, antecedents, and consequences). Here's what we know about B (its definition, antecedents, and consequences). Here's what we know about C (its definition, antecedents, and consequences). Putting this all together, we can propose that A, B, and C are related in such-and-such a way. To remove any doubt, we will collect data to see if it fits this proposal."

Choosing the Appropriate Sources

When writing a literature review, it is important to find all the relevant literature, sort through it, reject the low-quality material, and focus on what is left (Grant & Booth, 2009). When describing research-relevant literature, it is useful to classify each work as a primary, secondary, or tertiary source (Salkind, 2017).

Primary sources are original, empirical studies that collect data to test a hypothesis, form a theory, or describe a phenomenon. Most primary research is reported in peer-reviewed journals (e.g., *Great Commission Research Journal*, *Christian Education Journal*, *Missiology: An International Review*, or *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*) and has sections introducing the problem examined, a literature review, hypotheses or research questions, a description of the methods used to collect the data, the results of an analysis of the data, a discussion of the meaning and implications of the results, and a list of references used in the study. Some edited books also contain primary sources. Books edited by academics (e.g., Ireland & Raven, 2020; Wuthnow, 1994) with chapters written by different specialists also may report primary research, although other chapters would be considered secondary sources.

Secondary sources are compilations and summaries of primary research. These may take the form of a book written by a researcher (e.g., McGavran & Wagner, 1990; Twenge, 2017b), literature reviews (such as those mentioned previously), meta-analyses (statistical summaries of quantitative studies, e.g., Donahue, 1985; Mahoney et al., 2021), handbooks (collections of review articles written by scholars on a specific topic, e.g., Davis, 2010; Hunt, 2019), and sometimes review articles written by experts in serious magazines such *The Atlantic* and *Harvard Business Review* (e.g., Maccoby, 2000; Twenge, 2017a).

All other sources are tertiary sources. These include popular books based on the author's experience or opinion, encyclopedias, textbooks, newspapers, Wikipedia, popular magazines such as *Christianity Today* or *Psychology Today*, and most web pages. Tertiary (or general) sources are useful for getting an overview of the topic or for demonstrating the reality and importance of a problem, but they are not considered credible scholarly resources and should generally not be included in literature reviews. Rather, literature reviews should focus on primary and secondary sources.

It is essential to focus on high-quality sources. The internet has made it easier to access high-quality research easily and freely through sites like ResearchGate.net, Academia.edu, and Scholar.Google.com. However, it has also made it easier to disseminate low-quality research as well. High-quality sources of research are generally found in peer-reviewed journals with editors and reviewers who are academic experts in their fields. An easy, but not sufficient, way to identify peer-reviewed scholarship is to look for an abstract at the beginning of the article. Most peer-reviewed articles begin with an abstract that can help the reader determine if the rest of the article is worth reading. An abstract generally contains a summary of the article, including a description of the sample used in the study, the research methods used to conduct the research, and a summary of the results (i.e., it is not a teaser to motivate you to read more). The website of the journal publisher should provide information about the editorial board and the peer-review process used to select papers to publish.

The researcher should try to use the highest quality research when preparing a literature review. Some journals, usually among the oldest in their field, are more selective in what they publish than other journals. Authors often submit their work to one of these more prestigious journals first and then, if their work is rejected at their first choice, resubmit to less prestigious journals until it is accepted somewhere. The prestige of a journal is mainly determined by its impact factor, the average number of times per year articles from that journal are cited by other journals (see mjl.clarivate.com for one measure of the impact factor of thousands of journals). The general importance of a specific article is measured by the number of times it has been cited by other scholarly works; Google scholar (scholar.google.com) provides an easily accessible approximation of these citations for each article, as well as a searchable database of journal rankings based on what Google calls the h5-index (https://scholar.google.com/citations?view_op=metrics_intro).

Unfortunately, the last decade has seen an explosion of poor research published in what has come to be known as predatory journals (Beall, 2015). Because academics must often publish or perish, a market has developed for publishing low-quality journals. Academics are spammed daily with invitations to publish in supposedly peer-reviewed journals with publishing fees that range from tens to thousands of dollars. These journals typically have legitimate-sounding names but will publish most any paper for the publishing fee. These journals are typically "open access," that is, freely accessible on the web immediately upon publication. There are some legitimate open access journals because some funders require it (e.g., *PLOS One*, *SAGE Open*), but many are predatory. Since new predatory journals appear regularly, there is no list that identifies all of them (and some of the older lists mistakenly included legitimate journals in them). Here are some guidelines for determining if a journal is legitimate.

- Google the name of the journal (in quotation marks) plus "predatory." The journal may appear in a list of known predatory journals.
- Check out the publisher. Legitimate journals are usually published by large, well-known publishers (e.g., Wiley, Sage, Elsevier, Blackwell, Cambridge University Press, Emerald) or by not-for-profit professional societies that are focused on a specific topic (e.g., Great Commission Research Network, Evangelical Missiological Society, American Psychological Association). Again, google the name of the journal (in quotation marks) plus "predatory" and examine the results.
- Examine the number of citations the article has received. In Google Scholar (scholar.google.com), find the article and the "Cited by" number on the final line of the article description. Low-quality articles from predatory journals are rarely cited (at least not by scholars; students are less selective.)

Not all low-quality research is found in predatory journals. When journals are first launched, they may have difficulty attracting high-quality submissions and have to publish the best that they have, even if the research is not especially credible or insightful. Unlike predatory journals, these journals may have a legitimate peer-review system and may not charge publication fees. They are sometimes known as "emerging sources" (Clarivate, 2022) and are often published in developing countries where universities are growing and trying to establish international reputations (often by adopting Western "publish or perish" norms in academia). Signs of low-quality research include poor English editing, poor typesetting, the use of weak evidence or arguments, vague information about the research methods used, and the improper use of statistics. When writing literature reviews, researchers need to critically examine each source of information to be included in the review.

Types of Literature Reviews

Literature reviews can have different forms and purposes (Cooper, 1988; Grant & Booth, 2009; Paré et al., 2015). All of them result from the authors "locating, obtaining, reading, and evaluating the research literature" (Bordens & Abbot, 2011, p. 66) relevant to their research question. Literature reviews are distinct from empirical studies in that literature reviews do not seek to collect new data concerning a specific phenomenon. Whereas empirical studies tend to have narrow research questions, literature reviews can have broader research questions that are addressed by integrating the results of a wide range of empirical and theoretical studies (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Literature reviews are also distinct from meta-analyses (Glass, 1976; Rosenthal & DiMatteo, 2001), which are summaries of quantitative studies with the results presented in tables of numbers (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). Meta-analyses serve similar functions as literature reviews and can be just as (or even more) informative than them. Meta-analyses help sort through contradictory studies which find both significant and insignificant relationships between variables by combining the statistics presented in the individual articles into a composite calculation of the strength of the relationship. The meta-analysis presents a conclusion that is more trustworthy than the conclusions of individual studies included. Meta-analyses can also discover moderating variables, that is, conditions under which a relationship is especially strong or does not exist (Rosenthal, 1991; Rosenthal & DiMatteo, 2001).

The Purpose of the Literature Review

The purpose of the literature review should be clear to the author from the beginning because it will influence every aspect of the research process. There are many different ways of classifying literature reviews by their purpose (Cooper, 1988; Grant & Booth, 2009; Paré et al., 2015). Some of the most common are described as follows.

Critical Reviews. The purpose of critical reviews is to demonstrate that the author has mastered the literature on the topics relevant to the research question and to provide the background necessary to do additional research (Dunaetz, 2020c; Grant & Booth, 2009). These reviews typically result in a hypothesis or a model to be tested. This is the most common type of review written by graduate students as they prepare their thesis or dissertation. They are also found in the introduction to empirical studies to provide the background necessary to understand the research and to provide justification for the hypothesis tested or research question addressed.

Narrative Reviews. The purpose of narrative reviews (e.g., Mermilliod, 2021) is to summarize the most important research on a topic (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Grant & Booth, 2009). They present what is known and what is not known on a topic. These reviews often occur in academic journals with "review" in the title.

Systematic Reviews. These reviews focus (e.g., Fapohunda, 2021) on a systematic search of all the databases for knowledge on a topic (Fehrmann & Hawkins, 2014; Fehrmann & Wagner, 2012; Grant & Booth, 2009). The standard for the search is often set by an external authority, such as a funder or a doctoral advisor. In principle, systematic reviews done by different researchers will yield similar conclusions.

Integrative Reviews. Also known as theory development reviews, integrative reviews seek to tie various strands of research together into a coherent whole, such as a modification of an existing theory or into a new theory, or to apply knowledge from one field to another field (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Torraco, 2005). Integrative reviews are typically used when research done in secular contexts is applied to Christian contexts (e.g., Dunaetz, 2010) or when research done in one ministry context is reviewed and applied to another ministry context (e.g., Urton, 2022). Integrative reviews are especially relevant for application-focused research journals such as the *Great Commission Research Journal.*

Factors to Consider When Writing a Literature Review

The form of a literature review will depend on many choices that the author must make. The SALSA framework for literature reviews (Search, AppraisaL, Synthesis, and Analysis; Grant & Booth, 2009) describes some of the main choices.

Search. How will the researcher find relevant articles and how much time will be invested in finding these articles? Using the academic databases in libraries (Atla Religion, PsychInfo, ProQuest Religion, etc.) allows for a systematic approach to searching for literature that can be reproduced (e.g., Fapohunda, 2021), but it tends to be slow and the order in which the works are presented is not always clear. Google Scholar (scholar.google.com) is much faster. It sorts the results first by the number of keywords in the title and then by the number of times the work has been cited. But Google Scholar can produce different results at different times and contains more irrelevant results. Library databases require some sort of membership or affiliation, but Google Scholar often has direct download links to PDFs in the right column next to each work. Google Scholar is also linkable to university libraries and databases (via Settings) to download articles when PDFs are not available for direct download.

AppraisaL. To what degree will the literature review appraise and evaluate the works included? Sometimes the appraisal is done informally to determine what works the researcher wants to read more thoroughly. In this case, no appraisal of the quality of the research is presented in the published literature review. This may be the case when a limited number of works are being compared (e.g., Urton, 2022, in this issue). Other times, the researcher may evaluate the methods used in each article and only report relevant conclusions based on the high-quality studies. In other studies, the researcher may want to provide information on the quality of all the studies examined, both high and low to compare and contrast the high- and low-quality studies (e.g., Stewart et al., 2010).

Synthesis. Putting the information together from various studies examined can take on several forms. Sometimes the researcher just wants to introduce research on a topic without trying to synthesize it. But more often, especially in more detailed literature reviews, a more complete synthesis is needed. The most common form of synthesis is a narrative integrating all that is known about the phenomenon under consideration. This calls for a mastery of the relevant research and insight into how to present it coherently. Other times, a historical synthesis is appropriate, presenting a chronological description of how knowledge and perception of a phenomenon have evolved to the present state. In other cases, the synthesis can be put in tabular form, especially if the information can be presented in a clear and logical structure that has little need for a narrative explanation.

Analysis. In most cases, the researcher writes a literature review to lead to new ideas, perhaps a new theory, perhaps a new application of a theory, perhaps a research question to be addressed, perhaps a hypothesis to be tested. To do so, the literature reviewed must be analyzed. When creating a new theory or a new application of a theory, the analysis needs to be in-depth and robust. When trying to describe the current state of research to determine what is known and what is unknown to justify further research, the literature review needs to be complete, but the analysis presented may be shorter than in other types of literature reviews.

These are the main factors that should be taken into consideration when writing a literature review (Grant & Booth, 2009). Other factors should also be taken into consideration (Cooper, 1988; Paré et al., 2015), including the audience who is likely to read the review (generalist or specialist), the scope of the review (broad or narrow), and overall focus (theory, research methods, or practice). All of these factors should be considered when writing a literature view.

Practical Guidelines

To make a literature review as useful as possible to the audience who might find it either through searching library databases or the web, following several practical guidelines can help.

Accessibility. Anyone with a college education should be able to read a well-written literature review (Bem, 1995). It should not be addressed to specialists, so specialized vocabulary needs to be explained. The specialized vocabulary associated with different fields of church-based research is useful among specialists (e.g., homogenous unit, catalyst, or movement), but needs to be explained so that those who are not familiar with the technical meaning of an expression can understand the review.

Avoiding Lists. Most humans would rather read a story than a phonebook. A literature review should aim at telling a story, communicating a central idea in a persuasive manner (Bem, 1995; Sternberg, 1991). Authors should avoid mind-numbing lists and bullet points. They should argue for a clear point of view, creating a flow that is natural and coherent, with adjacent ideas clearly linked. They need to stay focused on the argument, avoiding tangents. In literature reviews, it is easy to get distracted by describing relatively unimportant research.

Clarity. Clarity and precision are primordial for literature reviews, whereas flare and style should be secondary (Bem, 1995). Figurative and ambiguous language should be avoided. Accuracy is more important than using a wide vocabulary or flowery constructions. Parallel structure in sentences and paragraphs is especially useful for this. For example, suppose I want to communicate two ideas. The first is: When a youth pastor arrives in a church that is under 5 years old, such a church tends to grow when the neighborhood is growing. The second idea can be communicated either as:

1) When a new head pastor arrives in a church under 5 years old, such a church tends not to grow even if the neighborhood is growing.
2) In growing neighborhoods, church growth does not result from the installation of a new head pastor if the church is under 5 years old.

Standing alone, sentences 1) and 2) are about equally clear concerning the second idea. But given the first idea, sentence 1) is much clearer because it maintains the same structure and makes it easy to understand the contrast made. Parallel structure makes both contrasts and comparisons easier to understand.

Write and Rewrite. Few writers put their thoughts onto paper clearly in their first attempt. We need to write, rewrite, and rewrite some more until the text is as clear and precise as we can make it (Bem, 1995). Once we have gotten that far, we should give our manuscript to one or more of our most critical, trusted colleagues (perhaps even our spouse) and ask them to critique it. If they say something is unclear, we should believe them and continue improving it. When we submit our literature review to a peer-reviewed journal, the reviewers will likely find even more issues that need addressing. This is all part of producing the highest quality research. We should embrace it rather than fight against it.

Conclusion

Literature reviews are an essential tool for dealing with the explosion of knowledge relevant to church-based research. They may be difficult and time-consuming to write, but they can serve all those seeking to fulfill the Great Commission by summarizing and synthesizing information that may enable them to be more effective. May the readers of the *Great Commission Research Journal* be motivated to write more literature reviews and may the literature reviews published in the journal contribute to the advancement of the Kingdom of God.

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