

Foundational Literature Reviews

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Foundational reviews of literature are summaries of current and historical research on a topic. These reviews are considered foundational because they cover original literature all the way through current literature in an area of inquiry. The reviewed literature comes in a variety of forms including empirical and theoretical, but it must in some way anchor an area of research. Unlike traditional literature reviews, foundational reviews are not constrained by time, disciplines, or methodologies. Foundational reviews of literature extend to non-academic sources in addition to academic ones. Traditional literature reviews frequently reference literature from other disciplines, but they tend to focus on literature from a single discipline and single methodology. Traditional reviews also tend to focus on recent research. Foundational reviews of literature, on the other hand, examine a variety of sources and methods across larger spans of time. As such, foundational reviews provide more depth and coverage than literature reviews because they are free from these constraints.

This entry discusses the concept of foundational reviews in communication research. It describes three types of reviews of literature and distinguishes foundational reviews from literature reviews and meta-analyses. Specifically, it discusses similarities and differences between foundational and traditional reviews of literature. Finally, this entry provides strategies for incorporating foundational literature in reviews.

Reviews of Literature

There are numerous approaches and strategies for summarizing and synthesizing previous research, but nearly all reviews of literature can be categorized into one of three types. The first type of review is the traditional and most common literature review. Literature reviews provide context and justify the relevance of a study. These reviews are the most common in published research. Literature reviews are used to identify problems or shortcomings in the current state of research. The second type of review is the meta-analytic review. Meta-analyses are more complex than literature reviews. They typically attempt to

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systematically compare and contrast studies conducted on a topic within the last two or three decades. Meta-analyses are used to describe a key effect or relationship in the literature. The third type of review is foundational review. Many foundational reviews can be found in doctoral dissertations, but they are less commonly published than traditional literature reviews or meta-analyses. Foundational reviews of literature are used to develop an in-depth understanding of a topic.

Foundational Reviews of Literature

Although foundational reviews of literature are less common than the traditional literature reviews that are found in most journal articles, they share many of the same principles and practices as literature reviews. For instance, traditional literature reviews reference foundational studies and provide topic-focused summaries of area of research. Foundational reviews also identify foundational scholarship and provide reviews of topics, only on a larger scale.

Foundational reviews of literature generally differ from traditional literature reviews in terms of coverage. Foundational reviews of literature are exhaustive reviews of previous research. Many doctoral dissertations follow this practice. Literature reviews, on the other hand, are exemplary reviews of previous work. Many literature reviews focus on central works in order to provide representative accounts of current bodies of knowledge. Some literature reviews make arguments by strategically focusing on previous research. In both cases, the coverage in literature reviews is more selective compared to foundational reviews.

Specifically, foundational reviews of literature are less constrained and therefore provide more thorough and in-depth reviews than traditional literature reviews. Literature reviews are constrained by time. Although literature reviews reference foundational studies, they typically focus on current research. Literature reviews are also constrained by disciplines or fields. Literature reviews focus almost exclusively on academic research. Even beyond that, some literature reviews focus on only one discipline. Literature reviews in communication research frequently include references to other disciplines, but the vast majority of literature still comes from academic sources. In contrast to literature reviews, foundational reviews of literature are not constrained by time, discipline, or method. Consequently, foundational reviews of literature provide more comprehensive and in-depth coverage of a topic.

Goals of Foundational Reviews

Goals associated with foundational reviews tend to be much larger than goals associated with traditional literature reviews. Unlike literature reviews, foundational reviews of literature are not constrained by time, discipline, or method. In addition to covering more time, forums, and methods, foundational reviews also provide more depth than traditional literature reviews. Taken together, this

makes foundational reviews substantially larger projects than literature reviews. Accordingly, goals associated with foundational reviews such as developing a mastery of a topic area are more career rather than project focused.

Traditional literature reviews are argumentative. Literature reviews often start by identifying the problem or gap in research the study intends to fill. Foundational reviews of literature are about understanding. Rather than orienting around an argument, foundational reviews use research as starting point. Accordingly, the ultimate goal of foundational reviews is to develop an in-depth understanding of a topic

Benefits of Foundational Reviews

Primary Sources

There are several benefits associated with foundational reviews of literature. One advantage is that reviews of foundational literature promote the use of primary sources. Although use of secondary sources is often discouraged, many literature reviews rely on secondary sources when primary sources are too old, not academic, or come from different methodologies. Since the goal of foundational reviews is to review current and historical literature on a topic, foundational reviews are more conducive to primary sources since they are not constrained by time, discipline, or method.

Establishing Credibility

Another benefit of foundational reviews is that it helps to establish credibility on a topic. In addition to providing context and anchoring a study, literature reviews also provide evidence of an author's expertise. Writing in-depth reviews of current and historical literature in an area is one way to demonstrate that an author is well read on the subject.

Checking Assumptions

Foundational reviews can also make key assumptions salient. Often times, important theoretical and empirical assumptions are examined in detail in foundational literature, but only briefly covered, or sometimes entirely ignored, in later research. Literature reviews typically only identify foundational studies and develop arguments from current research. And those reviews that do provide summaries of these foundational studies often rely on secondary sources. An important benefit of foundational reviews is that they make previously overlooked or problematic assumptions more salient. Foundational reviews require greater familiarity with the basic assumptions described in foundational literature.

Incorporating Foundational Literature

Identifying the original literature for a topic can be difficult. The foundation of one topic is often the result of changes to another topic. Many topics in communication especially emerged as an extension of research in other fields such as sociology, psychology, and political science. In these cases, it may be necessary to provide a justification for the selected starting point.

Foundational reviews of literature can be organized in numerous ways. However, given the nature of these reviews as accounts of historical and current research, organizational strategies commonly follow a chronological pattern. While traditional literature reviews commonly use thematic organizational patterns to strengthen their arguments, foundational reviews are more history-oriented. Accordingly, the sequence of events is important.

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