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Some Alternatives for Placing the Literature in a Qualitative Dissertation

Earlier in the Spring of 1995 I solicited responses from people regarding "literature reviews" in dissertations. The text of my request follows.

Recently I have become interested in the structure, placement and use of "literature reviews" in dissertations. There are a variety of positions regarding structure, placement and use of the "literature review." If you have served on a qualitative dissertation committee I would like to know what your position is with regard to structure, placement and use of the "literature review." If you have completed a qualitative dissertation I would appreciate a brief description of how your committee expected you to use the literature review and a brief commentary noting how you felt about your review and its utility.

Specifically with regard to placement, where should the review be located in a dissertation - before or after the methodology? There are of course other more specific choices about placement. Briefly note where you think that it should be placed and why.

With regard to structure, I'm interested in whether you might use a fixed format, and if so briefly describe the format. Some like to think of the format as one that addresses certain types of questions. Still others see the literature review as a comprehensive summary of all the published research associated with a given problem. Please provide a brief note about placement.

Use of the literature may be tied to structure and placement or it may be tied to something else. I would also appreciate a brief comment on your perspective regarding the use of the "literature review."

I was particularly interested in determining whether dissertation researchers placed/wrote their review of the literature section before or after data gathering - although I accidentally used the term methodology rather than data gathering. I don't believe that this error had much influence on the responses that I received. A second somewhat related question that I had was one of determining what purpose the literature review served for dissertation researchers.

I had 17 individuals respond to my request with 14 of them useable. The 14 respondents were all researchers who were either writing their dissertation and nearing completion or had just recently completed their dissertations. It is interesting to note that there were no dissertation committee member providing a response.

Responses to my request referred to the "literature review" as manifesting itself in one of a variety of ways, as a(n): rationale for qualitative methodology; demonstration of a basic knowledge grounding for formulating the study (theoretical grounding); comprehensive review of all literature relevant to the "topics" to be studied; framework within which the findings were to be discussed (interpretive framework); academic exercise with little direct relevance to the study. From the responses it was clear that my choice of the term "literature review" was not a particularly appropriate descriptive term.

The responses tended to address two of the questions posed by my request: where is the literature review/theory placed and how did you use the literature review. I have briefly summarized these responses in the paragraphs to follow.

General Response to Placement

I initially placed the literature as an early chapter because ...

A large number of the respondents reported that the literature review was “initially” either the second chapter of the dissertation or preceded the methodology discussion - many suggested that either their committee or tradition dictated that it be placed as the second chapter. One respondent noted that the literature review was interspersed throughout the dissertation and was not represented by a specific chapter. Some had more than one review in the dissertation - “I really did two lit reviews, one substantive, the first chapter, and one methodological, the second chapter.”

General Response to How the Literature Was Used

IN RETROSPECT THE EARLY CHAPTERS OF THE DISSERTATION MAY NOT HAVE BEEN THE BEST PLACE FOR MY LITERATURE REVIEW.

The role the literature or theory chapter played was a major determinant in terms of the respondents’ thinking about where it should be placed - regardless of committee expectations. One respondent placing the “theory section immediately after the introduction”, (preceding the third chapter on methods) noted, “In a preface I advise the reader to read the third chapter first. As my method is ethnographic, my theory grew out of my data.” Another respondent who provided a second chapter literature review noted, “... literature review is being repeated in chapter 4 since my descriptions are being tied back to previous research reported in the literature.” - and then went on to note that the committee suggested a repeat of the information in the fourth chapter. Still another respondent notes, “I have just decided to move my literature review of the evaluation approach used in the case study from the front of the dissertation to the back. ... because it puts this discussion in the context of the case rather than being a disconnected bit up front.” Still another respondent who noted that there was a second literature review had similar logic, “The second literature review was not identified as such. Literature relevant to findings that emerged from my data ... was integrated into the final Discussion Chapter.” One respondent noted that without having the literature review preceding the methodology chapter it would not have been possible for him to interpret the results.

BRIEF SUMMARY

Although never stated explicitly by either myself or those responding I believe that we all assumed that the term qualitative research or inquiry referred to an inductive approach. There are three points of summary.

(1) Respondents felt that qualitative methodology needed to be rationalized either in the methods chapter or in a chapter that precedes the methods chapter. Such a rationale is most likely based on the methodological writings of scholars and methodology texts - thus it is probably referred to as either “general literature review” or “qualitative theory” or as “methodology”.

(2) A few respondents felt that the traditional second chapter as literature review was important for establishing a framework for what was going to be studied as well as a context for interpreting the findings. However, there seemed to be a number of respondents who felt that the inductive nature of qualitative research does not usually (meaning there are exceptions) facilitate a preconceived framework within which to contextualize findings. These respondents found it necessary to either reconstruct or

construct, for the first time, a theory section for their dissertation - after they had gathered and made preliminary or penultimate interpretations of their data. For this "literature review" that is composed after textual data collection, analyses and preliminary interpretation the word "theory" is appropriate, since such a review is necessarily selective in terms of what literature is relevant to the findings and how this literature will be synthesized in preparation for contextualizing the results.

(3) Most respondents either directly or indirectly implied that they felt it important to acknowledge or clarify their "grounding" prior to gathering their textual data. "Although some qualitative researchers argue that one shouldn't do a lit review until after one has collected one's data, I feel I would probably still be writing or even collecting data had I done it that way," - i.e., not done a lit review. Another respondent had this to say about the knowledge that they have prior to initiating their dissertation, "Thus, the researcher's interest in the study will affect to varying degrees, the focus of the study and even potentially the findings of the study. I guess I sort of liken it to having some kind of blueprint before building a house. Yeah, you can make changes in the plan as you are building, but at least you have some idea of what you are building."

As doctoral students, dissertation researchers are well versed theoretically and frequently it is the theoretical understandings that they have gotten from their course work and readings that provide the substantive underpinnings for the inductive qualitative study that is being readied. However, the precise theoretical context for interpretation will most likely be a derivative or off-shoot of this substantive knowledge and this knowledge will not only inform the research in the methodological analysis of the textual data, it will also be used, after the data are collected, as an organizing framework for the literature that will be used to contextualize the findings of the researcher.

CONCLUDING STATEMENTS

My preference would be for the dissertation scholar to demonstrate a solid theory grounding, acknowledgment of a potential interpretive framework, before the methodology preferably in the first chapter or a small second chapter. I would prefer to see qualitative methodology, the specific qualitative techniques to be used in the study, rationalized in the first section of the methodology chapter. Once you have summarized the textual analyses the findings should be presented, and then you should be ready to construct a relevant literature framework, based upon a knowledge of the results, for contextualizing the results in existing theory and literature. This literature framework may take the form of a separate chapter, either "relevant literature review" or "Theoretical Framework" or some other appropriate title. The textual analysis results would then be contextualized into the literature or theory in the chapters that follow.

It is very clear to me that there could be excellent qualitative dissertations that have no "literature review/theory section". It is possible to take the results of the textual analyses and as you discuss their meaning you would include the relevant literature in the discussion rather than as a separate literature chapter. This is exactly how one respondent dealt with the literature.

I do appreciate the time and efforts taken by those who responded to my request. My apologies for being delinquent in preparing this summary document.

Those who are enamoured of practice without science are like a pilot who goes into a ship without rudder or compass and never has any certainty where he is going. Practice should always be based on a sound knowledge of theory.

Leonardo da Vinci 1452-1519 Notebooks

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