

Literature Reviews Program Transcript

[MUSIC PLAYING]

NARRATOR: Have you ever thought about a literature review as representing your intellectual heritage or intellectual genealogy? In his exploration of the purpose of a literature review, Dr. Patton explains this interesting perspective. He also points out common errors to avoid when undertaking a literature review.

MICHAEL QUINN PATTON: One of the things that we do as scholar practitioners is look at the knowledge created by other people. And we draw on that knowledge as a way of positioning our own work and understanding where our contribution to knowledge, our own research, fits in that larger tradition. This is often referred to as the literature review. And the way that you go about knowing the knowledge that others have generated, that you're going to build on and contribute to, is to conduct a literature review.

I tend not to like that terminology, because it sounds like the purpose is to review the literature. Literature review is actually a means to another end. And it's that end, it's that purpose of conducting the literature review that I want to focus on.

The purpose is for you to understand your intellectual heritage, your intellectual genealogy. Anytime we undertake an inquiry into a particular issue, we are building on the knowledge of others. And we need to know what that knowledge is. It's part of our obligation as scholars, is to understand what work has come before us, what concepts we've inherited, what methods we've inherited, what measures we've inherited. Some of which we've adopted, some of which we've parted from. But we need to know that.

Because at the end of a program of study, a master's degree, a program of doctoral inquiry, you're going to be expected to be able to locate your work within that tradition. And so it means that you need to be able to establish the people who formulated the basic distinctions that you're drawing on.

Let me share with you some of the mistakes that I, from my point of view, find students engaging in when they undertake the literature review. One of these is to simply do an internet search to see how many articles they can find on a topic. Where they think that the game is how many citations you can come up with to show that you've done the literature review.

This isn't a quantitative game. It's not something where the number of sources is important. It's the quality of those sources and your engagement with them, that you are able to engage with what other people have done and understand what's relevant, what's not relevant to your own area of inquiry. So that you're positioning yourself out of those traditions that others have engaged in.

A second error is to think that the game is to position your work as unique. It is to try to find something that nobody else has ever done, to say nobody else has ever studied this before. Likewise, for any given field, there are burning questions that have defined that field.

In sociology, which is my own field, all sociology derives from what we call the Hobbesian question of order. What holds society together? Why doesn't society fall apart? Every sociological question stems from that question that Hobbes asked. And therefore, if you look at sociology articles in the premier journals, the *American Sociological Review*, the *American Journal of Sociology*, you'll find that they typically begin with a reference to Hobbes or to Durkheim time or to Weber or to Marx who were asking the original burning questions in psychology and sociology.

In psychology, you'll find original references to Freud and to Adler and to Jung that go back to things like the notion of the unconscious. And whether you agree or disagree with various aspects of Freudian theory, the notion that there's an unconscious mind and that that unconscious mind makes a difference in what we do is a part of what has framed modern psychology.

And so you stand on the shoulders of people who are trying to understand how the mind works, and who have divided off from those original classical theorists and researchers about how the mind works. The burning question in psychology is, why do we behave as we behave? How do we think and feel? How do we know and engage the world? And so you need to know who the classic people were who were asking those questions, who their disciples were, what were the splits along the world, along the journey where one group went in this direction and another group went in another direction?

Up to the more recent published research, and up to the kind of work that's now going on that may not yet be published, where you can get in touch with those people who are engaged in research now. Find out what the funded research is from the National Institutes of Health, the National Institutes of Mental Health, the major foundations. And find out what cutting edge work is going on so that you have a full scale genealogy of what your intellectual tradition is.

When you have finished that inquiry over a period of time, you're able to then say, these are the people on whose shoulders I stand. These are the intellectual traditions that I'm a part of. This is my intellectual DNA. Here is what I've drawn on. Here are the places where I'm departing from others. And here is where I'm going to make my contribution. That's the purpose of a literature review. You're positioning yourself in a stream of knowledge, in a flow of knowledge.

As a part of that work, a third error that I think students often make is to only read second-hand and third-hand accounts of the classics. The classics got to be

classics for a reason. People over the years read those works and found the thinking in them profound.

Yes, in some cases, the findings may be out of date. But a part of what you ought to be learning as you engage in a literature review and in your intellectual history is not just the specific findings. You are learning how scholars think. You're learning how scientists think. You're learning how a researcher thinks.

So read those works not only for what they found out. Read them for their methods. Look for the methods-findings linkage. How did particular findings yield and come from particular methods? How did those methods develop over time? And how did the classic writers think about things, inquire into things?

So as you're engaging in that, it has two streams that you're paying attention to. One is the theoretical stream. What are the findings? What are the constructs that you've inherited? And the other is the methodological stream. What are the methods of inquiries, the measures, the instrumentation, the ways of going about recording what you observe that we've inherited?

Both of those are your rich inheritance as scholar practitioners. And one of the things that you ought to come out of your education with is knowing what that intellectual heritage is, both conceptual and methodological, and then where you're going to make your contribution.