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Using the Literature: 3 x 4 Analogies

Alexander Massey

Oxford University, alexander.massey@edstud.ox.ac.uk

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Using the Literature: 3 x 4 Analogies by Alexander Massey *

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About the title

The first draft of this piece was written as a message to the members of the discussion group '[Qualitative Research for the Human Sciences](#)', and was in response to a discussion that had arisen about where to put a literature review in a research report. From the feedback, it is clear that some read the piece as though it was about literature reviews. It is not. The title indicates that it is about using the literature, which is quite different.

My first subtext is that one cannot sensibly say what a literature review is, what it is for, where to put it, or whether to have one at all, until one has thoroughly explored why, in research, we might even want to refer to what others have said and done.

There is a second subtext which, I hope, is more visible, and that is about the issue of authority in research. What counts as authority? Where can it be found? Why do we need it? Do we need it?

Here, then, is a collection of analogies to describe some of the ways I have seen literature being used in research. Inevitably, some of these overlap, but I see no particular virtue in the categories remaining mutually exclusive. Many aspects of research methodology intersect with each other, and this area is no different from any other in this respect.

Readers will differ over what they see as legitimate or dubious ways of using the literature. I would ask only that they keep my two subtexts in mind as they read.

1. Physical analogies

1.1 Literature as animal tracks

In the earliest stages of research, the researcher is a hunter, following tracks through only partially familiar territory. Some tracks turn out to be false trails, leading nowhere. Others are so old that they are of no use to the present search (though following some of these trails is a good way of getting to know the forest). So at this stage, the literature can be seen as a research tool for finding where others have (or have not) been before.

1.2 Literature as currency

- a) Literature reviews are expected to be up-to-date (i.e., 'current'). Thinking of my second subtext, I wonder why this might be so...
- b) But currency has built into it the notion of value. A literature review can be evaluative, weighing up the merits of previous work - ideas of criticism, analysis and interpretation are all part of this evaluative element.
- c) Currency can also be used to buy things. A good literature review can help buy the researcher's credibility (see also analogies [3.1](#) and [3.2](#)). To what extent is this a legitimate transaction? Should a reader sell his scepticism for the price of some punchy quotations and references to other politically accepted researchers and their projects?

1.3 Literature as building block

Traditionally, the literature review has often been described as the foundation stone on which one's own work is built. This fits with views of science as progression from previous work and 'adding to knowledge'. What value is placed on work which, however careful and systematic, does not draw upon this tradition of scientific inquiry?

1.4 Literature as scaffolding

Research is expected not only to ask questions, but to address a problem. If those questions have already been answered to everyone's satisfaction, or the problem has been solved, then the research is redundant. So the researcher is expected to show what related questions and problems have been addressed, and why his/her own proposal is different. The literature review (especially an opening chapter) may well be constructed as narration and argument: narration of what has been done so far, and argument about what has not been done adequately or what yet needs to be dealt with (new problems/hypotheses). It is the scaffolding for building the justification for one's own study.

2. Visual analogies

2.1 Literature as mirror

This one overlaps in some ways with [1.1](#) (finding things out) and [1.4](#) (seeing oneself in context). Looking in a mirror, one sees oneself. Literature can be used as a way of seeing where one's own ideas, assumptions etc. are similar to, consistent with, or different from previous research. What can I learn about my own research thinking from my reactions to the literature?

2.2 Literature as lens

Like a lens, literature can help a researcher focus on problems; a literature review can help focus a reader on the problem, questions, justification for particular methods etc. A lens can also magnify objects so that we can see them more clearly, in more detail. And if, for example, we turn the telescope/binoculars round, an object can look smaller than it really is - helpful sometimes, when one needs to regain a sense of proportion, and see how one's own work fits into the broader picture.

2.3 Literature as signpost

We can't say everything. Quoting appropriate sources can point readers to where they can find more detailed information on topics which are relevant but not central to the argument. It is a bit like those labeled arrows on the edges of maps that remind you the map only covers a certain area, and there are lots of other interesting places you could explore if you had the time (and another map). This 'sign posting' can also be useful for indicating where to find a fuller exposition of the arguments which might justify a particular statement, serving as a kind of shorthand.

2.4 Literature as illustration

One may wish to represent (or support?) a claim by referring to particular cases. Rather than generate new data, it may be easier to pull examples from the literature to illustrate points.

3. Personifications

3.1 Literature as conjuror's assistant

Some take 'knowing your stuff' as a sign of credibility and authority. Being able to speak knowledgeably of related literature/work can, in some people's eyes, add weight to one's case. Put simply, the two arguments are, 'You should listen to me, I know my stuff', and 'You should listen to me, because other (more illustrious) people have said the same' (see analogy [1.2c](#)). Looks like a parlour trick to me; the literature can be used as a classic piece of misdirection by the conjuror/researcher, to make one look for authority in the wrong place. It's always helpful to have an assistant to distract the audience from the real business.

3.2 Literature as authority

Not much different from ([3.1](#)) in one sense. But there is a more positive side too. There may be claims which one makes which could only realistically be accepted by reference to someone who has done a systematic study in that area (see analogy [2.4](#)). I wonder, does this undermine the points made in [1.2c](#) ('bribing' the reader), [3.1](#) ('misdirection') and [3.4](#) (authority in numbers or exalted company)? Or is there something to be derived from all these perspectives?

3.3 Literature as mentor/supervisor

a) A mentor/supervisor is a constant companion to whom one can refer throughout the research, this means that forays into the literature can be happening all the time.

In terms of the final research report, references to literature are usually found throughout the text. Depending on the aims, style and subject of the research, and the purpose for writing about it, it may be appropriate to place a literature review at the beginning, end, or middle of a report. Or maybe several reviews are necessary in different positions in the report.

b) A good supervisor will point to other relevant ideas worth exploring (see analogy [1.1](#)).

c) A mentor can gently and kindly point out inconsistencies (within oneself and in relation to others), and act as an extra conscience or source of awareness of what one is or is not doing (see analogy [2.1](#)).

3.4 Literature as spokesperson

For myself, I do not see anyone as having greater authority than myself, even though others know things that I do not. I do not believe that my idea has more authority because someone else who is better known than me has had it too. As [Wittgenstein](#) (1921) wrote: "... it is a matter of indifference to me whether the thoughts that I have had have been anticipated by someone else."

So why do I quote literature at all? It is because someone else has said something just how I would like to say it had s/he not said it first. And attributing the quotation is both respectful and helpful (see analogy [2.3](#)).

Epilogue

When I was training as a teacher, my drama tutor gave me a useful piece of advice. He said: "If you want to learn something about an assumption or assertion, tie a 'not' in it." By this, he meant that one should take the claim, and negate it: i.e. assume it is not true. This then frees and encourages (perhaps forces?) one to explore other possibilities.

Perhaps I have been clinging too much to the assumption that literature is and should be an integral part of doing research and writing about it. Perhaps, more controversially, some studies or reports might be best served by not using any literature at all?

In this piece, I have used only one reference. I could easily have got away without it. Ignore the content for a moment, and consider its impact. Is the fact that I have made a reference to Wittgenstein's writing a 'matter of indifference' to you?

Reference

Wittgenstein, L. (1921). *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*. Routledge Kegan Paul, London, 1974 edition.

Editor's Note

There are two postscripts to this paper. The first, [Postscript One: Using "Using the Literature"](#), was written in November, 1996 by the author in light of the responses he had received regarding this paper. The second, [Postscript Two: Literature as Geodetic Survey Map](#), was composed via email in April, 1997 by the author of this paper along with Vincent Hevern.

Alexander Massey, MA PGCE MSc, is currently working on a DPhil at Oxford University in the Department of Educational Studies where he is studying supply (substitute) teachers. His mailing address is Oxford University Department of Educational Studies, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY, England. His e-mail address is alexander.massey@edstud.ox.ac.uk and his World Wide Web Home Page is <http://www.geocities.com/Tokyo/2961/>.

Alexander Massey MA PGCE MSc
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