Benefits of a Systematic Review of Literature

Finishing the comprehensive exams is a great accomplishment and a moment that indicates the onset of the research study. This significant milestone in your doctoral journey raises questions about the process. Where do I start? What can I do first? The research proposal is the very first draft of where the work begins. It puts you in the position of seriously considering the details of your design, formulating the research question, covering some key topics in your literature, thinking about the theory and the conceptual framework, and others. The research proposal, however, is still a short version of your ideas about the study and a tiny piece of what is coming ahead. In this brief article, I want to introduce the concept of starting with a systematic review of literature, either before or immediately after the proposal. The decision may be personal and depending on several factors, such as timeline and organization style. So, what is a systematic review of the literature, and what is it going to solve for you?

A systematic review of literature is an organized and detailed tool for exploring the literature on your topic. It is a mini-study on its own that follows specific guidelines and attempts to collect, cover, and organize the entire scientific literature in a chosen topic. It starts by selecting 3 – 5 keywords on the subject of interest and plugging them in various databases. The process asks for meticulous details on keywords and databases, the number of hits and the process followed to narrow it down. This is the trickiest part, albeit straightforward, but it may take a person several trials to get to the right combination. Once this combination of keywords and databases is achieved, one starts selecting research studies to include and to exclude on the final review. Most systematic reviews get to a group of studies to go over anywhere between 25 to 100, but seldom above that.

The second part of the systematic review starts with organizing the group of studies into a spreadsheet table. Everything from the name of the author, gender if identifiable, the journal’s name, the title of the study, the focus of the study, the theory used, type of design, number of participants, demographics of participants, and findings. Depending on the topic of interest, this list could be longer or shorter. This table allows for immediately noticing details about the body of the literature. Imagine the body of the literature as a live thing, and you are first looking at it, identifying who and how has contributed to it. Every single body of literature is a work of art on its own right, and this organized way, allows you to look at it with different eyes. You will notice areas that none has touched; you may notice that the majority of studies are done outside of the United States, you may notice that the majority of researchers are women, or that they mostly follow a quantitative design. You will see things about the participants, now looking at it from a group perspective rather than isolation. Maybe the body of literature mostly studies men, or most of the topics are focusing on an area that is different from yours. In other words, you look at it from the top of a mountain, and you find your niche. Now, you know exactly why your topic is important, what is missing from the literature, and how your work will add to the practical or academic knowledge. You write all your findings down, and you have not simply conducted a systematic review that clarifies your topic and your position on it, but you have also finished your second chapter of the literature. You have also gained some experience on how to conduct any study out there, and have embodied this understanding of looking at your study differently.

Finally, let’s put in perspective the benefits of starting your dissertation with the second chapter rather than the first:

*1. Straightforward design –* No confusion on how to start my literature, how to search, where to look, and how to identify studies. A systematic review of the literature follows a specific straightforward design without any gray areas.

*2. Identification of gaps in the literature –* Every time someone said, “you need to find the gaps in the literature,” I had chills when I was a student. Why? Because it sounded like this mountain, I had to climb, and I had no idea where to start or how. The systematic review of the literature does that, so naturally that it is difficult for anyone to miss the gaps of the literature.

*3. Find your niche –* You may think you have your niche, but the systematic review reveals to you that studies in your particular area are abundant. In fact, there is a different area where you can contribute, and you become interested as you organize the literature. In other words, the process helps you reinforce your topic or find a new one.

*4. Familiarize with methodologies of studies similar to yours –* This is important. Not only you will see how other researchers have conducted their studies, but you will also understand what good design is, what works better, what is the ideal sample size, and what sample size seems to reach saturation. All these are important details that you need in your research proposal and your methodology section.

*4. Intuitive organization of your literature –* One of the barriers to writing the second chapter is how to organize the literature review in such a way that you make your point at the end. This often faces confusion and unproductive weeks, mostly because it is unclear where to start and how to follow-up. The systematic review, once again, gives this to you almost instantly. The easiest and least creative way would be to start grouping all the categories and discussing them. One can be very creative in this process to identify what is done in this body of literature and what is still missing.

*5. Chapter 2 is done –* An entire chapter of your dissertation is completed, and that means one step closer to completion.

*6. Publish as a stand-alone article –* Many doctoral students and even faculty publish systematic reviews of literature as stand-alone articles in peer-reviewed journals. This means that you too can publish your work as you are working on the rest of your dissertation. It will give you a sense of accomplishment, an advantage on the job market, and personal satisfaction.