

Interrogating information through a literature study



Stephanie Barrientos

Any kind of research or investigation in policy is going to involve, at some level, a study of the relevant literature. If you are the investigator yourself, this study may be the main focus of your work, or it may simply serve as background for other forms of research. Either way, you should be able to analyze and use literature in order to support your own research project. It is likely this is going to involve you in a search for information using literature from a diverse range of sources, be they academic, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), governmental or community groups. You may well need to combine your use of literature with other sources of information such as interviews, surveys or data, and all may form part of any final report you present. However, a literature study can also constitute a policy investigation in its own right, if enough evidence can be obtained from analyzing what others have written.

It is useful to distinguish the idea of a literature study from that of a literature survey. A literature survey involves you primarily in summarizing the material as accurately as possible. A literature study involves a process of critically assessing and evaluating the same material in order to develop your own analytical approach and/or relate it to new aspects of inquiry. While a literature study is more focused, a literature survey is generally a necessary preliminary phase in any such study.

In this chapter we will examine the aims of a literature study, the methods by which a literature study can be carried out, the interface between literature and other sources of information, and, finally, how you can use literature to formulate your own argument and present your own analysis. It is important that you learn to evaluate the literature you read in a critical way, and develop your own arguments and structure so that your final written work stands up as a coherent piece of analysis. Even if you are

in a position of commissioning and using the results of others' research, rather than doing the investigation yourself, the same skills will be useful. On the one hand you need to understand what the researchers have to do and the difficulties involved; on the other you have to evaluate their reports critically yourself – and those reports are themselves contributions to the literature!

It is important to stress that literature-based research is a constantly iterated process of:

- (a) gathering and assimilating;
- (b) evaluating and analyzing;
- (c) formulating your own arguments on the basis of your analysis of what you have gathered;
- (d) structuring and writing up your arguments.

Although you will be focusing more on gathering/assimilating information at the beginning and evaluating/analyzing later, they are not completely separate or discrete stages. Throughout we will consider the problems of time constraint. You will need to structure and plan your research in order to progress and achieve results within a realistic time-frame, and in this respect it is important to divide your research into different, if overlapping, stages.

The chapter has four main sections, related to the different stages you will need to go through in order to complete your own literature study. At the same time the sections are interconnected, discussing the process you are likely to go through in your research. You may find some sections more relevant than others, depending on your own purposes in using the literature. The main focus of this chapter is on literature-based research. But even if you are only using literature as a background to other types of research – participatory rural appraisal (PRA) or data analysis, for example – you still might find it useful to think about all aspects of literature-based research, as in your final outcome you will probably be integrating results from your primary and secondary data sources with information gathered from the literature.

This chapter mainly deals with published or accessible literature, and should be read in conjunction with Chapter 6 by Bridget O'Laughlin, which considers many of the same issues using 'grey material' and institutional literature.

Section 5.1 considers aspects of the literature search, possible sources that can be used, internet search engines and problems of timing and information availability. It highlights the advantage of using systems for logging and referencing data and generating bibliographies. It considers the related issues of surveying the literature you acquire, and using this to trace further sources and to help focus your own study so that it is manageable and leads to productive results. This focusing involves posing a central question, which will guide your study throughout.

Section 5.2 examines how you can approach studying the literature you read. Having already posed the main question of your study, you can analyze the available literature in that light. This is broken into three parts: (a) how to evaluate an argument or approach; (b) how to locate an argument or approach; and (c) how to

compare different arguments or approaches. There are no hard and fast rules for these, but this section attempts to give you guidelines, and indicates problems you might encounter.

Section 5.3 discusses the next stage, which is the process of formulating your own argument. The step from summarizing other people's ideas to articulating your own can be a very difficult one. Again there are no hard and fast rules, but once again posing the right question is central to this process. Your analysis of the literature was related to the central question you posed. Now you draw your own conclusions from this analysis which forms the basis of your own argument. It is this process which is essential to completing a coherent, well-argued study based on the literature.

Section 5.4 examines the final stage of structuring your study, linking all the material you include to the central argument, and writing it up in a way which is readily accessible to the reader. If you have been successful in formulating your own argument, this stage of your study should fall into place fairly easily.

In this chapter, I will develop and use a single example of a literature-based study throughout. The example I use is part of a study examining 'The rise of female employment in global export production?'. This example study is based on similar research that has been carried out in a number of countries engaged in export production – Barrientos (1997), Kabeer (2000), Lim (1990), Elson and Pearson (1981), Pearson (1998), Collins (2003). Of course, your own study could be completely different from this example, but it provides concrete indications of the types of problems you might encounter.

While this chapter can give you insights into the process of literature-based research, ultimately there is *no* single formula or set of hard and fast rules. You will need to use your own initiative, logic and intuition to achieve the results you are aiming for. The main thing is that, whatever your topic, you consider it from the different aspects this chapter explores, even if you arrive at the conclusion that certain angles are more relevant to your specific research design than others. Research can be a bumpy road, but hopefully this chapter will help you to think objectively about the process you are involved in, and help you avoid some of the potholes – thereby making the journey all the more worthwhile.

5.1 Literature search and survey • • •

This initial phase of a literature study is intended to be wide ranging to help you acquire a broad understanding of the topic, and then progressively narrows down to focus on a more manageable area to survey. The aim is to define the central question for the literature study that will guide the later analytical phases.

5.1.1 Literature search

It is likely that once you initiate your investigation of a topic, you will be operating under tight constraints, both in terms of the time you have available and your physical access to sources of information. If you have little knowledge of the topic, this is going

to be more problematic than if it relates to a similar area you have already researched. When starting from scratch, your first aim should be to try to find literature which gives an overview of the topic: any articles, books or pamphlets which survey or summarize the field. This is a quick way of familiarizing yourself with the area of the project; getting to know what work has *already* been done (there is no point in reinventing the wheel) and giving you key sources or references. You might find these through an internet search, by contacting key institutions or organizations, visiting relevant bookshops or libraries, or by talking to someone who has already done related research.

Where publications are available through the internet, they can increasingly be accessed from most parts of the world. The internet has become a powerful source of information. Using search engines such as Google Scholar allows you to trace published data, often on quite obscure topics (see <http://scholar.google.com/scholar/about.html>). You are now able to download documents directly, including papers put up by different institutions and articles from an increasing number of e-journals. Some universities and other research organizations have electronic subscriptions that give you access to journals and other published material whose circulation is more restricted by copyright. Even where you are unable to download material directly, the internet gives you greater access to information about published information, either through references or abstracts. You can then chase up the original material through other means.

A greater challenge is where published material is only available in hard copy but is not accessible in local libraries or bookshops. If it is a book that is still in print, it can normally be ordered by mail through internet based companies such as Amazon. If it is out of print, access to the material may be restricted to locations that are at some distance or in other countries. If you are researching in a developing country, you may find that publications you need are located in one or more developed countries (which have the main publishers and libraries and many institutional headquarters). However, if you are in a developed country, you may find that important primary sources are only easily available within developing countries to which the information relates. Ideally you will be able to visit both, but if not, try and find contacts who might lend you information, and write to people or organizations abroad to try and obtain information you are lacking (do this early on as it will take time). Ultimately your research will be constrained by the information you have access to, and you should remember this in determining the focus of your study.

Wherever you are based while doing the work, you may be able to visit specialist libraries. Many libraries now have computerized cataloguing and search facilities. You will hopefully be able to gain access to search facilities, such as CD-ROMs, to search for sources in your specific area of interest. Ask librarians for help. If they become interested in your quest, they can give important leads. Most large international organizations have regional libraries, and many government and non-government organizations have sources of information in both published and unpublished form. O'Laughlin in this volume deals with the latter type of material in depth, and from the

beginning you should gather as much relevant information as possible from all sources (the most frustrating thing in a literature search is not picking up something you had access to which you later find you need). You may also need to contact the original source of the information, such as authors, NGOs, banks, international institutions, government departments, or other bodies that have produced publications relevant to your field. You will need to allow time for this. You can do this most easily through email, building up a contact list for information in the process.

When you use formal or computerized search facilities you are going to have to start defining the focus of your study by the key words you use to initiate your computerized literature search. Equally, you must try different key words and combinations to be sure you are accessing all the relevant literature available. This is shown using my example study in Example 5.1. Not only should you put in obvious key words and as many related combinations of key words as possible, but also try and think of alternative words for the topic you are searching, and don't forget to search for material related to particular institutions as well.

Example 5.1 Finding key words

Example study title: 'The rise of female employment in global export production?'

Obvious key words: 'employment', 'female', 'global exports'.

Other key words and phrases which you might try in different combinations include: 'global production', 'export processing', 'trade', 'gender', 'women', 'work'.

Related institutional searches might include: UNIFEM, ILO, Oxfam, Global Union Federations.

One word of caution is that modern computerized searches can generate large quantities of references. You may find you have acquired access to so much material it is difficult to know where to start in terms of unpacking it. A first tip is to carefully log all the references you acquire, and where possible keep a short summary or abstract of its content. This can most easily be done using reference software systems such as Endnote that allow you to enter all references you encounter and/or read. When you come to write, these also generate automatic bibliographies, saving a lot of time in the final stages. Even without such programmes, you can keep a reference record yourself in Word or Excel.

The next issue is deciding what to read, given you do not have time to go through every piece of published material you acquire. Initially, it is useful to look for fairly general books, journal articles, or reports in your area. This gives you an overview of your field before you narrow your topic down. Where you see certain works being referred to

repeatedly by different authors, you are getting an indication of the main works and debates in the field of your study.

But you will need to focus your topic as soon as you can so that you use your time productively. How you narrow your topic may be largely influenced by your brief and your organization's policy requirements, but your own particular interests will play a part, as well as the availability of material, resources, and the time you have available. It should also be driven by the central question you decide upon. It is very easy, through your interest and enthusiasm in a subject, to be overambitious in your aims. However, any research project has to be of manageable size and have clearly stated objectives if it is to be successful in fulfilling those objectives.

Having defined the scope of your topic, you must now start pursuing references and leads in the literature in a more specific direction. Only pursue references or read literature that directly relate to your question. You will probably continue your literature search, although less avidly, quite far on into the research for your study, as you continue to encounter and chase references you had not seen before, or decide to explore new angles you had not initially considered. But gradually its importance will decline as you move further into your study, and your own work becomes more focused.

5.1.2 Literature survey

As you accumulate and read material, so you embark on your literature survey. When you first start surveying the literature, you do so fairly 'blind', taking in much of what you read as it is presented. You might have noted different ideas and approaches in the literature, and certainly papers, articles and books will have examined the topic from different angles.

Initially this will be a fairly broad survey, but as you narrow and define your topic, so you will begin to concentrate your survey on the literature of most relevant interest to you. As soon as you have defined your topic, you need to write a brief plan of your study, which acts as a guide for your further search, survey and analysis of the literature. It is very easy when you are doing a literature project to read *ad infinitum*, but you could well be wasting time which you do not have. A plan helps you to focus and also to allocate your time appropriately. This early plan is not definitive, can easily be amended, and can be integrated into your terms of reference if it is part of a broader research project involving, for example, field study.

5.1.3 Focus: initial plan and central question

The initial plan should give you a central focus and framework for your study. You achieve this by identifying the specific aim of your project – which is the central question you want to address. Each section of your project should then relate to this central aim, which acts as a backbone to your project. We are going to explore this in some

detail later on, as this is an essential part of carrying out a literature project. But the earlier you identify this central aim, the more you are able to focus your research productively. As a general guide this initial plan should be as brief as possible (one side of A4 paper is enough). It should contain the following information:

- Title
- Aim (problem and central question you are going to address)
- Key issues (with short summary of each)
- Other research methods to be used (summary of methodology)
- Time schedule

This outline acts as a 'photograph' of your project which you can keep in mind at all times. It helps you to organize your material, discard literature which is not relevant to your specific needs, concentrate on the sections of any book or article of greatest importance, and search for new relevant material. At the same time you should write a time schedule for your work, detailing your time allocation for:

- literature research;
- other research methods (interviews, participatory methods, data analysis, etc.);
- writing, allowing time for redrafting and polishing at the end.

This helps you to organize and divide your research time proportionately between the parts of your project, within a manageable deadline.

5.1.4 Literature study

As you progress with your literature survey, so you will need to begin to study the literature analytically. In Chapter 6, O'Laughlin writes of moving from a survey to a study of the literature. Here I prefer the idea of search/survey as the first phase in a literature study, followed by analysis. However, there is no single point of transition from a survey to the later phases of a literature study. As you begin to analyze, you will continue to search and survey new work, guided in part by the ideas you are beginning to form. But, increasingly, you should be able to read from a more critical standpoint and be able to relate it to any additional research (field work, survey material or data analysis) you are going to use.

When you critically assess material, you do not do so in a vacuum. An essential ingredient in this is that, as early as possible, you will have posed a question which you want to address, and from then on you approach the literature in the light of analyzing its relevance to your question. Having a central question is important both in giving focus to your reading and in framing any further research design. It will play a central role through to the final conclusion of your investigation. In Example 5.2 I consider how this might affect my example study.

Example 5.2 Posing a question

In my example study, I started with a fairly broad title 'The rise of female employment in global export production?' But this is still fairly general, and could involve uncritically summarizing a range of case studies, without any yardstick for comparing or assessing them.

Posing a central question helps to resolve this, and the question I will pose is: 'How can employment in global export production help to empower women?' This is not directly a policy question, but such research could help to underpin a gender sensitive approach to policy formulation. The question can help to inform the literature search.

- 'Empowerment' needs to be entered as a keyword in the computer search. In general the search should explore literature on the empowerment of women.
- It helps to focus analytical reading of the literature. In any book, article or document, I am interested in the information given, but now I particularly want to ask how this affects the empowerment of the women themselves.
- It helps to evaluate *critically* the literature used. Even if an article doesn't mention empowerment, what are its implications?
- It helps to interpret and unpack any given policy and data.
- It poses a framework for carrying out further in-depth research such as semi-structured or focus group interviews with temporary women workers, and helps the design of that research.
- Ultimately, it will provide the basis for writing up the research.

5.2 Analyzing the literature • • •

We now need to consider how to analyze the literature we are surveying. One problem you are likely to face in development or policy studies is that the literature may be from a range of different sources: academic, government, non-government or other organizations. They are going to be written from different perspectives, in different styles, using different 'in-house' language. O'Laughlin examines the use of grey and institutional material in Chapter 6, but let's consider the general issues. First, we'll look at how to assess articles or reports individually, before going on to comparing them.

5.2.1 Evaluating an argument

The process of critically assessing a piece of literature starts with evaluating its position or argument and logical construction. Evaluating a position or argument can be

broken down into two important parts. Firstly, you have to identify the argument accurately. If you misunderstand or misrepresent an argument, your own final analysis of it will be flawed. Secondly, you have to consider whether the argument you are examining is logically consistent internally and meets its own objectives. In other words, do the conclusions follow from the premises? We will consider each of these separately.

Identifying an argument

The extent to which identifying an argument is easy or problematic will depend largely on the author you are reading. Some authors present their ideas very clearly and systematically in an articulate form. They will start at the beginning with a summary of their views, the questions they wish to address, the material they are going to examine, the methods they are going to employ and the conclusions they aim to draw. So long as they fulfil their objectives clearly, then your main role is to take accurate notes.

Often, though, written work appears very complex, and cannot be easily summarized in a few paragraphs. In this case you have to be very patient in working through the argument, accurately recording all the essential points, in order to get an overall view of the main features and their interconnections. Sometimes, a piece of writing *looks* highly complex, but once you have isolated and identified its essential points, it is actually quite simple. Do not be intimidated by the fact that some writers have perfected the art of dressing up mundane ideas in sophisticated language. Therefore, you need to question everything you read, but at the same time be accurate in distinguishing and recording the main features of its argument. Remember, too, the points Joseph Hanlon made in Chapter 3 about writing to impress. He was thinking about how you might improve your writing style and write with different aims in mind, but of course similar considerations also applied to others writing up the reports which are now part of the literature to you.

Alternatively, you might encounter an empirical piece of work containing a large amount of factual information and data, but no clear argument. The way data are selected, organized and presented often reflects a particular perspective, whether or not that perspective is explicitly stated. In this situation you need to stand back from the piece of work, and consider what type of data have been considered relevant and how these data have been selected and are organized. You might also need to consider what data or evidence have *not* been included. Often you can evaluate a piece of literature just as much by what has *not* been considered, as by what has (see Mayer, Chapter 11).

The other problem you might encounter is when, however hard you try, you are unable to identify exactly what the author is trying to say. It is not easy to give advice on this, except to suggest that (a) you try to get as close an approximation to the argument as possible, and (b) if you decide to use the argument in your own final report, you indicate that this was the argument as you understood it.

The logical consistency of an argument

Examining a piece of work for logical consistency will depend partly on its structure. In turn, the structure might vary, in accordance with the methodology employed by that

author, with the particular approach or institutional perspective of that author, and with the nature of the work under examination. The main thing to look for in determining logical consistency is whether the conclusion logically follows from the premise, given the assumptions made, and is supported by the evidence given.

In determining the internal consistency of a piece of work, you must be aware of the criteria that piece of work sets itself. Does it pose a central question or issue that it is going to address? Does each stage in the argument or procedure adopted follow logically from the previous one? Do the data and empirical evidence support the argument, or are there contradictions? Are there dislocations in the argument? Does it arrive at a conclusion consistent with its original aim and supported by the evidence given? I am trying to provoke you, when reading, to ask yourself whether you think a piece is consistent, or whether it contains contradictions in terms of its own argument or approach which undermine its validity as a piece of analysis. Example 5.3 considers the type of literature encountered in my example study.

What we have been considering so far is the evaluation of a piece of work in its own terms. When making notes on a particular piece of writing, you may want to add comments of your own. This can be useful for the comparison stage and for formulating your own arguments (see below). However, be sure to make a clear distinction between your own comments and your evaluation of a piece of work *in its own terms*. The next stage is to locate each argument in relation to others, before going on to a comparison between one argument and another, and weighing them up in relation to available evidence (data, surveys, etc.) which has not necessarily been included. Finally you will need to consider the importance of an argument for your own study.

Example 5.3 Evaluating the literature on female employment in global export production

Let us consider this process of identification and evaluation using my example study. Assume that the literature I have encountered through my search and survey can be broadly divided into three categories:

- 1 *Global exports*. Much of the literature is easy to identify and categorize. Some more economic literature extols the success of global exports, and argues that trade liberalization, improved efficiency and high productivity (no mention of gender) have been key to expanding global exports and creating new job opportunities. Other literature is directly critical of global export production, arguing it generates wasteful consumerism, drives out local producers, and provides low paid and exploitative jobs.
- 2 *Female employment in export production*. There are a number of case studies on female employment in export production. Many are quite descriptive, but often

(Continued)

(Continued)

they reflect different standpoints. Some take a negative perspective, highlighting poor labour conditions, the multiple burdens that women workers carry. Others take a more positive view, emphasizing the opportunities this has created for income generation by women, and overcoming barriers to female employment. Some weigh up the benefits and costs to women of working in global export production.

- 3 *Women and empowerment.* Again, we will find different perspectives in the literature. Some authors emphasize the repressive nature of women's employment in export production and its disempowering effects. Others emphasize that this employment has facilitated greater empowerment of women through economic independence, control over their income, bargaining power within the household, and voice in the wider community. However, some take a more ambiguous position, weighing up both the pros and cons of working in export production.

So far I am assessing the direct literature relating to the particular question I have posed. I have been taking notes of the different positions in each article or book. But, on its own, it might not provide sufficient analytical tools to answer the question posed in depth. To interrogate the literature further I may need a set of sub questions, which in my example of women's employment in export production could look like this:

- (i) Why has global export production drawn in a large female workforce?
- (ii) What are the employment relations experienced by women in this type of work?
- (iii) What are the wider gender relations that condition women working in export production and how do these affect women's empowerment?

To explore the sub questions further, I am likely to need to draw on a wider literature that informs, but does not necessarily directly deal, with the central question. In my example, sub question (i) can be further examined through the literature on global value chains and production systems and a more technical literature on product innovation and specialization in the global economy. Sub-question (2) may involve exploring the literature on flexible employment, and work risks more broadly in a global economy. Sub question (iii) can be further examined through feminist literature on a gender bias in the economy, and debates on women's empowerment in other contexts.

At this stage you are not necessarily taking a position on whether you agree or disagree with an author. Even if you have your own position, it is important you examine all perspectives in the literature thoroughly to ensure you are fully informed. Your main activity is to have a good record of the different positions held by different authors. You are also looking for consistency in their arguments. Do they substantiate their arguments with facts, do they use well documented evidence, do their conclusions follow from the logic of their argument and evidence presented?

Drawing on a wider literature gives you more substantive information for assessing your own questions in more depth. It provides a basis for coming back to your central question, and weighing up the different perspectives you have encountered in the literature dealing directly with women's employment in global export production.

5.2.2 Locating an argument

In order to weigh up the different arguments you have encountered in this diverse literature, you need to be able to place it in the context from which it arose and also to identify where it fits in terms of different analytical approaches and paradigms.

1 *Examining the context*

It is likely that the literature you are going to compare comes from a number of different time periods, institutional sources, theoretical approaches, and ideological perspectives, each reflected in different paradigms or policy agendas. None of it was written in a vacuum, and examining the context can provide important insights into a better understanding of it. The greater your understanding of the problems different authors have sought to address, and how those problems arose, the greater your understanding of their analytical perspective and any conflicts between the different approaches you encounter.

The extent to which you need to look at the context will partly be dictated by the type of topic you are researching. In most policy-based research, you may need to identify the development process and the specific problems which arose in order to contextualize the different policy proposals, and also consider the position of the different actors within any given situation. This is particularly important in comparing work from different agencies, in which you need to consider the institutional context, whose interests are being represented, and what is the underlying policy agenda (see Chapter 6).

Exploring the context of a topic can involve consulting a wide range of literature on economic history, social and political and policy related issues, both in relation to the country or countries and to the topic you are examining. This can be very time consuming. If you decide upon this course, you will only be able to consult a sample of sources; try to look in the literature for any overviews, literature surveys, and summaries already carried out by other authors. You might also find it helpful, for example, to see if similar work to your own has been carried out for another country, from which you might gain contextual insights. You will need to use your own initiative on this, but you must be very careful to limit the time you spend, and stick rigorously to your original time schedule.

2 *Different analytical approaches*

Development and any other field of policy studies are also composed of a number of quite different approaches, which you must also be aware of in evaluating the literature, contextualizing your project, and developing your own analysis. You will not have time to go back and familiarize yourself with each different approach (unless you are specifically examining one of these in your study), and will have to fall back on previous knowledge and overviews. It is often possible to find a comprehensive review article which also sets out the main schools of thought on an issue – though,

of course, it will be that author's view on what the main schools of thought are! (for example, Kabeer, 1994 on gender and development; Gereffi and Kaplinsky, 2001 on global value chains, and Collins, 2003 on women working in global apparel).

Whenever you read an article, book or piece of analysis, it is important to try to locate it in terms of which approach it reflects. When an author indicates clearly the viewpoint he or she is starting from, this is quite easy, but many authors will not render you this service, or might be combining ideas from different schools. There are four aspects you need to concentrate on when attempting to identify the approach of a particular author, although the relative importance of each will vary according to the type of literature you are reading.

- What are the key theoretical assumptions?
- What empirical evidence or data are used?
- What are the policy prescriptions?
- What references are cited?

Let us assume that you are looking at two pieces of work on structural adjustment and poverty written from different perspectives, for example. If the author assumes free markets and free trade are the most efficient method of development, cites key macro-economic indicators, argues that greater economic liberalization is the most beneficial policy prescription, and cites authors such as Krueger (1974), the work is of neo-liberal origin. If, conversely, the author starts with an analysis of entitlements and capabilities, appeals to social, poverty and equity indicators, and advocates community-based social policy as an essential element in resolving problems of economic development, citing authors such as Chambers (1997) and Sen (1999), the work is drawing on a capabilities or participatory perspective.

These, however, are two fairly clear-cut examples. The problem of locating a piece of writing in terms of a particular approach can be difficult. A piece of writing may contain a number of competing influences in explaining a particular phenomenon. This is more likely in recent development literature, where increasing credence is given to a multi-dimensional perspective on poverty and development. Once you focus on policy analysis, which by necessity involves a degree of pragmatism, pinning a proposal to a specific analytical approach can be even more difficult. Also, some authors may not want to be pigeon-holed. They may try to present themselves as having taken everything into account and then put forward a balanced view. This may ultimately be unhelpful in that it tries to gloss over differences between approaches, and it can be difficult to pin down the particular author's argument. However, it is up to you to gauge the main influences and general perspective of any work, and weigh up the relative importance of its theoretical perspective to the given literature you are studying.

How you do this again will depend very much on the type of topic you are researching, but, for example, you could develop a chart to group the literature you are using, and if necessary break it into component parts according to its leaning. Let us assume, for example, your study involves using material from two approaches (neo-liberal and capabilities), and you want to examine the background, analytical, empirical and policy angles of the topic. Much of the literature you are dealing with might not neatly fit into one approach

TABLE 5.1 *A simple breakdown of the literature*

	Neo-liberal	Capabilities	Multi-dimensional
Background material cited			
Theoretical assumptions			
Data and empirical evidence used			
Policy prescriptions			

or another, so a chart of the key aspects you are examining could help you break down an individual article, and help as a method of comparison of the literature.

A possible example of such a chart is given in Table 5.1. Using this you could note (or tick) the leaning of each component part of an article, use this to weigh up its overall approach and compare it with other articles similarly deconstructed. This is a fairly mechanical method. You would need to evolve your own version of such a method with which you feel comfortable, and which would help you to think logically through the process of evaluation and comparison.

5.2.3 Comparing arguments

The next stage in a literature project is when you begin to compare and weigh up arguments, which may be from different theoretical perspectives. There are no hard and fast rules for comparing different arguments. Hopefully, you will begin to do this intuitively as you are reading, but it is important that you are aware of this as an essential transition to developing your own arguments and conclusions.

The *problem* of comparison really lies with the literature which is not easy to group by approach. For example, two articles might appear to agree in the main about analysis of a problem, but come to quite different or opposing conclusions in terms of policy. Here you will need to question each article. What context were they written in? What are their unstated theoretical assumptions? What are their institutional agendas? What evidence do they appeal to? What authors do they cite? What are the unstated implications of their policy prescriptions? All of these types of questions will help you to unpack and weigh up the literature. But, ultimately, you will have to use your own initiative in comparing this type of literature.

However, one additional test, which is vital, and leads on to the next stage, is: How do any two pieces of literature relate to the central question *you* are asking? At this stage you are not simply comparing the literature 'blind' or in a general way. You are weighing it up and comparing it in preparation for your own use, i.e. in order to formulate your own argument or to integrate it with other forms of research which your question is leading to. Therefore, analyzing and probing it in terms of your own central question is a way of comparing literature, not in and of itself, but in terms of its relative importance to the project you yourself are carrying out. To what extent do two articles relate to your question? To what extent do they throw new light on your question (whether or not you agree with them)? To what extent do they refute or support the available evidence and data?

What further research do they necessitate? How do they relate to the arguments you are developing, and conclusion you are now beginning to arrive at? You are now involving yourself, and your own research project, in the process of comparison, and, at the same time, using the literature as part of the process of formulating your own arguments and further analysis. However, it is important to re-emphasise that when making notes on any piece of writing, make sure you (a) summarize and evaluate it in its own terms; (b) make your own comments as part of a comparison with other writing and formulating your own arguments; and (c) distinguish clearly between (a) and (b). It is this process which ultimately constitutes the advancement of research.

Example 5.4 uses my example study to consider the problem of evaluating the literature in more detail, and the type of chart which might help us to break down the literature into its component parts for the purpose of comparison.

Example 5.4 Comparing the literature

My example study deals with issues relating to women's employment in global export production. I have also formulated my question regarding the empowerment of women workers, which I want to use in analyzing the literature for my own purposes. I have drawn up a set of sub questions that help to interrogate the issues further. I thus need to elaborate a chart as a means of breaking down and evaluating the literature I am studying. Table 5.2 gives a simple example of a chart I could use. Here it is very simple, but could be expanded to help sieve all the issues touched on by any piece of literature, and the perspective taken in relation to each issue.

Any literature which clearly supports a free-market, free-trade approach to global exports, argues that it generates positive employment opportunities for women workers, and that this employment is empowering would clearly be grouped in the first of each pair of sub columns: 'Pro' in the global export column, 'Positive' in the women's employment column and 'Empowers' in the women's empowerment column.

Conversely, any literature which is critical of the effect of global export production, and which emphasizes the problems faced by women workers and the importance of improved pay/working conditions, transport, health provision, social provision and reproductive rights for women workers, will clearly be grouped in the second of the subcolumns: 'Critical' of global export production; 'Negative' on women's employment; and 'Disempowers' on the outcomes for women workers.

The problem is going to be in locating literature – for example research or policy documents coming from government organizations – which advocate a combination of the above. For example, such documents might be critical of global export production but ignore the problems faced by women workers altogether. Conversely, they might support global export production but also argue that women workers are adversely affected and need more support. The sub questions provide an important mechanism for sieving and comparing different pieces of this type.

TABLE 5.2 *Simple chart to evaluate literature on temporary women workers in agribusiness*

	Leaning of literature					
	Global Export Production		Women's Employment		Women's Empowerment	
Issues covered:	Pro	Critical	Positive	Negative	Empowers	Disempowers
Economic/ industrial Employment Gender analysis Empowerment						

5.2.4 Moving the literature boundary

So far we have concentrated on examining literature in a published form (quite likely including pamphlets and institutional literature). But we must remember that all published literature has a 'vintage', be it new or old. The information contained in a recently published book, for example, could be at least one to two years old, allowing for the process of writing and printing, etc. (although some non-academic publishers can speed up the process). The information contained in an article or pamphlet might be more recent, but, once published, it has entered the public domain and there is little point in simply reiterating it.

An examination of the existing literature is always an essential part of research, but it is likely you will need to move beyond this boundary if you are to produce material of additional value. Within the context of a literature project itself, this could involve trying to find unpublished material (see Chapter 6), or material which is still in the process of being developed, by attending relevant talks or conferences. Through this you become familiar with similar work which is in progress (again no point in simply reiterating it), or gain access to new sources of information such as discussion or policy documents.

The main way of gaining access to this type of supplementary material is to contact other people, be they key informants, professional experts, or other researchers (see Hanlon, Chapter 3). It is usually beneficial before talking to such people to have done your own groundwork first, so that you can hope to have an informed discussion with them, and understand the context and background to any new information. But you can also see some of the problems and issues other researchers in the field are grappling with, which can help inform the process you are going through. Research is often an isolated process, and simply talking to someone who is knowledgeable in the field can help you to formulate your own ideas. If you are working in a developing country, with

little library access, this could also be a means of access to published literature you cannot easily obtain.

Moving the literature boundary is also the point of interaction with non-literature forms of research. Other chapters explore these in detail, but you should always remember that a literature project can contextualize, inform and help to direct. Literature is ultimately a means of communicating the results of other research mediums. So, for example, you may want to supplement your literature project with semi-structured interviews, or a survey in the field. In both, the literature will have helped you to examine the general issues, and to identify weak areas which have not been addressed. This will help you in the formulation of your questions, and the design of any questionnaire (Mikkelsen, 1995). You might choose to pursue the data you have encountered in the literature. At the simplest level you may go back and analyze the original data source, or you may have obtained new secondary or primary data you wish to analyze in order to supplement, advance or question the existing literature in the field (Mukherjee and Wuyts, Chapter 10, and Mayer, Chapter 11, discuss these issues in more detail).

Alternatively, your primary aim may not be a literature project, but rapid or participatory rural appraisal (see Mayoux and Johnson, Chapter 8) or an econometric project, which the literature simply helps to inform. Again, the literature can be a means of contextualizing the research agenda, or getting a handle on the data or evidence you are analyzing (Section 5.3 examines this), and help you to confirm or interpret the results you obtain. The research process often involves constant interaction between quantitative and qualitative analysis at different levels (micro, meso and macro), especially in innovative policy analysis. Finally, your main aim may be to undertake case study analysis (see Thomas, Chapter 13), where literature provides one of several forms of evidence.

5.3 Formulating your own arguments • • •

Once your research is well under way, you will need to start formulating your own argument or analysis of the topic. This can be a very difficult part of a literature project. Summarizing other people's ideas can be fairly simple, but formulating your own involves a lot of energy and critical thought. Don't worry if you find it difficult; the best ideas will not necessarily come easily. There are three aspects to formulating your own argument:

- 1 the central and sub questions you want to ask;
- 2 the approach you want to take;
- 3 the conclusion you want to draw.

I will examine each of these in turn so that you can consider the role each plays in formulating your own logical argument.

Central question

We have already seen the importance of posing a central question for your analysis of the literature, and this now becomes a key element in formulating your own argument. However, it is worth standing back for a moment and thinking through whether your question as originally posed is quite the right question. You may want to modify it a little or even reconceptualize around a rather different question that makes it easier to formulate your own argument.

The central question can act as the ‘pivot’ on which you hang your own argument, and provides the backbone for articulating your own written work. Having a central question provides the linkage between your sub questions, which should all be connected to the central question. It is this which will provide the backbone of the project, allowing it to stand as an integrated whole (see Section 5.4 below).

Argument

It is possible that when you started the project, you knew the argument you wanted to develop. If you are working for a particular institution or organization, this might have been given to you as part of your original brief. If not, identifying a question can also help you to decide your argument.

In literature-based policy analysis, you will often be dealing with debates. You will need to develop and articulate your own argument through exploration and critical examination of the existing approaches you consider. In doing this, you might decide to align yourself with one particular approach on the issue, although you should always consider alternatives and possible criticisms of the stance you take. Alternatively, you might decide different approaches have valid contributions to make to understanding the problem you have chosen to project. Whichever line of argument you decide upon, it is important that the analysis of it is clear and consistent and leads ultimately to your final conclusion. Remember that others will be analyzing what you write, using the kind of critical approach put forward in the previous section!

Conclusion

For your own argument to be logical and coherent, you also have to arrive at an endpoint in this process. Your argument is the logical series of steps you have gone through – in your analysis of the existing literature and supporting evidence or research – which link the original question to the final answer. The argument you develop must be rigorous and the conclusion you draw should be logically consistent with your original question and supported by the evidence you present. Your argument has also got to be able to stand up to criticism. The argument you develop should be tenable, either in terms of logical reasoning or appeal to empirical data, and should consider potential refutations or criticisms. And each stage of your argument should be connected (however indirectly) and lead towards your final conclusion. Once all these elements are in place, you are in a position to write a well-structured and coherent report, which we will consider in more detail in the next section.

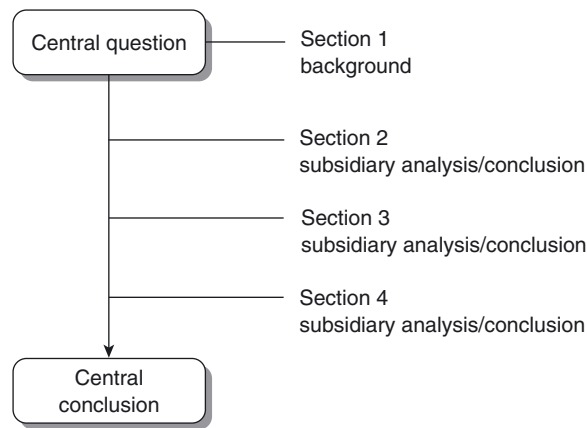


FIGURE 5.1 Literature study framework

5.4 Structuring your argument and writing up your report • • •

Early on in your study you should have written a short outline of its structure. As your research progresses, this outline must be expanded into a fuller structure through which you can develop your argument. The outline should encompass the central question and sub questions. The more coherent the argument you have elaborated, the more easily this structure should fall into place. The difference between the outline and this more elaborate structure is that you are now developing the complexities of the argument, and integrating into it the more peripheral points, while still ensuring that they are connected to the central question. Some points may not be relevant to the final argument, so, as Hanlon suggests in Chapter 3, you should be prepared to leave them out, even if they represent a lot of reading on your part.

The final written report must stand as an interconnected whole. Each section should clearly be linked to the central question of your study, and those connections should be logical, as shown in the integrated literature study framework in Figure 5.1. Further, the progression from one section to another should be determined by and encompass the overall progression of the central argument of your project from its initial question to its final conclusion. Hence each section is connected to the whole like a skeleton to the backbone, which in our case is the central question. This skeletal form is summarized in Figure 5.1. The key here is that you are now structuring your own argument, drawing on but not simply reviewing the existing literature. It is through your own independent evaluation and argument that you advance understanding of the issue.

If you already have a well-formulated argument, the structure of your overall study will probably fall into place fairly easily. But, conversely, it is often through developing

the structure and beginning to write your report that you ‘test’ the coherence of your argument, and you might find you need to refine it. The aim of the final structure, therefore, is to achieve the overall balance between sustaining the central argument of the study, while simultaneously exploring its various facets through analysis of the relevant literature and supporting evidence. Example 5.5 gives a concrete example of this, using my example study.

Example 5.5 Literature study outline – formulating an argument and structuring the report

Returning again to the example study, we have already decided the central question: ‘Is employment in global export production empowering for women?’. This central question has been supplemented by a number of sub questions. These have helped in the process of focusing on exploring and comparing the literature. The question is then used as the basis for formulating a substantiated argument, which frames the structure of the final report itself, drawing on the sub questions as a guide.

Female employment and empowerment in export production

1 *Introduction*

Brief outline of project and statement of aims: to examine the growth of female employment in global export production, the nature of their employment, and whether or not it is empowering for women workers. May provide a brief summary of key literature on this topic. Can also set up the central question ‘How can employment in global export production help to empower women?’ It may outline the different perspectives within the literature, but at this point does not answer the question.

2 *Global export production and female employment*

Considers the background and expansion of global export production, and the growth of female employment within it. Draws on literature on global value chains, production systems and product innovation. Links this with empirical information on global export production and rise of female employment. Assesses why demand for female labour has grown, and what role this employment plays in producing ‘just in time’ high quality products. Thus addresses sub question (i) Why has global export production drawn in a large female workforce?

3 *Gender and employment relations*

Assesses the type of employment relations and conditions of employment experienced by women workers. Draws on literature on flexible employment and work risks. Assesses why this type of employment relations have been generated in ‘just in time’ high quality export production and why women workers preferred.

(Continued)

(Continued)

Assesses changes in employment conditions through buyer codes of labour practice, and whether these have in any way affected employment relations. Thus addresses sub question (ii) What are the employment relations experienced by women in this type of work?

4 *Women's empowerment through global export production*

Probes the gender basis of women's employment. Draws on wider literature on gender bias in the economy, and different dimensions of women's empowerment. Links this with empirical information on the realities of women's lives, issues they face in juggling insecure work and childcare/domestic responsibilities in global export production. Weighs up other factors constraining the empowerment of women of working in export production, such as lack of adequate skills training or enforcement of good working conditions for temporary workers that are mainly women. Addresses sub question (iii) What are the wider gender relations that condition women working in export production and how do these affect women's empowerment?

5 *Conclusion*

The conclusion, based on the analysis undertaken, can then examine how policy can help to enhance the empowerment of women working in export production. This may be through more state provision of childcare, better occupational training for women, or stronger enforcement of labour regulation for temporary workers. This section draws together all the analysis and empirical information to answer the original question. Whatever conclusion is drawn, it must be substantiated by: (i) a critical review of the literature covered; (ii) weighing up the analytical perspectives and relevant empirical information provided. This must have been logically demonstrated through the previous sections.

In this example, the formulation of the central question regarding empowerment helps to link the analysis in each section, and thus the articulation of the argument which leads to the conclusion. The above structure provides the basis for writing the final report. It is only when you come to write that you will finally be sure whether you can sustain your central argument throughout, and you are able to tie all the separate parts of your analysis into an integrated whole. Always allow time for preliminary drafting, as it is bound to be fairly rough and disjointed at the beginning, and will need polishing to produce the final integrated whole.

5.5 Concluding remarks • • •

In this chapter, I have attempted to guide you through the various stages a literature study is likely to involve, and the types of problems you will need to address at these

different stages. The aspect of this I have concentrated on is how to transform a broad summary of the literature into an analytical study through which you can develop your own argument and policy analysis.

A problem with this is that literature studies can vary widely in both the types of issue they are addressing, and how they address them. I have attempted solely to give you some guiding principles. It will be your final decision to choose what is relevant to you, given the topic you have been assigned or have chosen, and the approach you want to take. The main thing is that you approach your study with your eyes open, and an analytical mind, that you question what you read, and question what you do, and that you use your own experience and initiative to achieve your objectives. The result will be a report that is consistent and clearly argued, and with which you can be satisfied as a piece of your own work and a useful contribution to policy.