

## Topic 8

# Finding Ideas in the Literature

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Before making a final selection of research questions, purposes, or hypotheses on which to base your proposal, you should read extensively on the problem area(s) that you have selected. While reading books (especially textbooks) will give you a broad overview, at this point you need to immerse yourself in the specifics of how others have conducted research. These specifics can be found in reports of original research published in academic journals. Such reports (called *research articles*) can be identified electronically. See Appendix A if you are unfamiliar with conducting such searches. Although electronic databases often provide abstracts (summaries) of the articles, it is essential that you obtain copies of the full articles and carefully read them in their entirety.

As you read, pay special attention to the *specific research questions, purposes, or hypotheses* that are stated in the article. Usually, these can be found in the paragraph immediately above the heading "Method" in the articles. Consider:

- Are the questions, purposes, or hypotheses similar to ones you have been considering for your research?
- Could any of them be modified to create a new problem that you might want to investigate?
- Were any of them sufficiently important that a replication of the study is warranted? Would you want to propose a replication (i.e., another study

designed to see if similar results are obtained)? Can you get approval from your instructor to propose a replication? (Note that as a learning exercise, your instructor may want you to propose "original" research rather than a replication.)

You should also pay special attention to the *discussion* sections that appear at the end of most research articles. In these discussions, researchers often describe the *limitations* (i.e., weaknesses) of their studies. Ask yourself whether you could propose research without these limitations. If so, you may want to propose a *modified replication* of a study in which you improve on the research methodology.

In their discussions, researchers also often describe *possible directions for future research*. Consider whether any are of sufficient interest to you that you might want to propose research along the lines suggested. These suggestions deserve careful consideration because they are being made by experienced researchers who have conducted publishable research on a topic within your problem area. Contrary to what some beginning students think, most researchers are more than happy to share their best research ideas with others. There is no greater compliment than having others build on one's previous research and having the original research cited as the inspiration.

## Topic 9

# Considering a Body of Literature

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Before making a final selection of research questions, purposes, or hypotheses on which to base your proposal, you should consider the body of literature as a whole. In other words, read all the articles you have collected on your general topic and reflect on them *as a group*. Ask yourself:

- What are the trends in research perspectives *over time*? For instance, does newer research use different conceptualizations than older research? As a general rule, you will want to use the newer conceptualizations unless you have a very good reason for doing otherwise.
- Are there particular lines of research that have been especially fruitful in uncovering important results? Are there unfruitful lines that you will want to avoid?
- Are certain previous studies repeatedly cited by current researchers? If so, this may point you to the historical roots of current lines of research. You will want to read carefully such landmark or classic studies for possible ideas for your proposed research.
- Are there obvious gaps in the body of research literature? For example, have all the researchers used only college women as participants? Do you have access to other groups of women that you might propose to study?

Often, those who write research articles will help you answer the questions. In the following example, the researchers point out an important gap in a body of literature.

### Example

Because most of the published research on prevention of youth substance use and abuse has been conducted with majority populations (i.e., white youth from the middle class), the question has been raised about whether interventions found to be effective with the majority group can be successful in preventing substance use and abuse among minority youth. With regard to that question, the limited amount of relevant empirical research has yielded mixed findings....<sup>1</sup>

In the next example, the researchers point out what has been established as well as current trends, which might be considered as a topic for research.

### Example

A vast literature now exists linking social support to well-being. Epidemiological studies show that people who have more supportive ties are less likely to become ill and more likely to live longer.... More recently, researchers who are interested in the effects that social relationships have on health have turned their attention to the negative side of social interactions [e.g., the effects of negative social interactions]....<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spoth, R., Gyll, M., Chao, W., & Molgaard, V. (2003). Exploratory study of a preventive intervention with general population African American families. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 23, 435-468.

<sup>2</sup> Helgeson, V. S., Novak, S. A., Lepore, S. J., & Eton, D. T. (2004). Spouse social control efforts: Relations to health behavior and well-being among men with prostate cancer. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 21, 53-68.