



# Presidential Address: the Declining Significance of the Literature Review in Criminal Justice Scholarship: Towards a New Paradigm

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**Abstract** Literature reviews in criminological and criminal justice journal articles have long served as an integral component in our empirical backyard. In this address I explore the value of the literature review in peer-reviewed research articles. I begin by evaluating the merits of the literature review section in empirically refereed research articles. I propose abandoning the literature review, due to its overall insignificance and best practices from other disciplines. Based on reasons outlined in this speech, I elaborate on the strengths and weaknesses of this somewhat controversial notion in the criminological/criminal justice discipline.

**Keywords** Literature review · Criminological and criminal justice literature reviews · Peer-reviewed research articles

## Introduction

When is the last time you read the literature review section in a research article? Let that sit for a second. I do not mean that you quickly skimmed the contents of the literature review. I do not mean going to the transition between the literature review and the methods section looking for the hypotheses associated with the study you are reading. I do not mean skipping to the references section of the article to look for new sources you have never read before. When is the last time you read the literature review section in a research article, from the end of the introduction section to the beginning of the methods/methodology section? My guess, based on conversations with numerous colleagues, many sitting in this room, is not very often.

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My answer to this question comes with two caveats. First, I read literature reviews when I am reviewing a manuscript for a journal; I just did one of these for the *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, SCJA's flagship publication, last week. I generally read through these heavily to make sure that all the relevant literature is present; this can also be an indicator that the author(s) know what he/she/they are doing. Like all good scholars, I am generally looking for shout-outs to my own publications or for any new sources I have not stumbled across.

Second, I tend to read literature reviews much more closely when the subject is either a) new in the field; or b) a new subject to me that I am trying to get into. If something is truly new, it is always interesting to see how the author(s) went about tackling the subject and creating a literature review for a topic that is brand new. This is relatively uncommon in criminology/criminal justice. Take subcultures, for instance. While new subcultures may arise occasionally, we can apply old knowledge from other subcultures or subculture theory to account for this new group and its behaviors, at least as a starting point. What is more likely for reading a literature review is when the topic area is completely new to a reader. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step; oftentimes when getting involved into a new subject area that can be reading a research article, complete with a full reading of the literature review.

For most of us though, reading a literature review completely is unheard of. This address will explore the notion that we should abandon the literature review from our empirical research. In making this proposal, this address outlines both the need and use of literature reviews historically, why omitting literature reviews from our scholarship is not as controversial as it may seem on its face, and the strengths and weaknesses of implementing such a plan for our discipline. I begin by reviewing the nature of the literature review in criminology and criminal justice.

## The Nature of the Literature Review

The literature review is the “obligatory” section sandwiched between the introduction and the research methodology sections of a research article. A good literature review attempts to provide an overview of a topic or prior research. Inherent in literature reviews is a comparison of prior research findings/outcomes and an overall synthesis of multiple studies/articles. Literature reviews should explain key ideas associated with the topic or metrics from an avenue of study. Perhaps most importantly, the literature review forms the basis of the current research effort to inform the reader what to expect from the study.

For all intents, there are two primary purposes for literature reviews in scholarship: the literature review establishes the history of a subject and/or its empiricism and the author's credentials in conducting the research. First, literature reviews outline the history of a topic, from theory to research. This work should serve as what Walker (1998) termed a “launching pad” for the current research; this should introduce readers to any new or complex terminology/concepts. The literature review should “flow from the introduction and provide a foundation for the [study]” (Walker, 1998, p. vi). Likewise, the literature review should establish the parameters of the discussion. Second, the literature review is designed to illustrate the author's credentials. If the author is not well read on a subject, a reader should question the merits of the research. This is especially true if the author is missing key, important references that have been conducted in the past. Not being well

read on a subject could indicate that the author has missed something important in their research. It could indicate a study that will test ideas already disproven, as a literature review is the first step for an author in establishing their bona fides to conduct research in a given area.

Stand-alone literature reviews account for a relatively small portion of refereed journal articles. Generally, manuscripts in criminology and criminal justice are around 30 pages long in Microsoft Word format. Literature reviews account for anywhere between 15 and 30% of the substance of all manuscripts today, and in the past, the percentage was even larger. Earlier works in criminology and criminal justice included a literature review that was over half of articles' length. This changed over the twentieth century as methodological techniques advanced and technology made statistical analyses easier.

Walker (1998) described the literature review as generally “mechanical” with the “author’s tone [being] almost resentful of having to prove that he or she understands others’ works”(p. iii). Walker (1998) further suggested that people do not “tend to understand the purpose of the literature review, or they do not agree with its value or purpose”(p. iii). In most cases, Walker, when asking potential authors about the importance of the literature review, reported that the most common responses were “‘It’s always been done that way’, ‘That’s the way articles are formatted,’ or ‘I only do it because I know it won’t get published without it’.”(p. iii).

Walker (1998) suggested that the greatest problem of many literature reviews is that they are poorly conceptualized and lack organization. Adding to the overall disorganization of some reviews is their often subjective nature. Sources need to be relevant to topical discussions and the most important sources are generally included in good literature reviews. After the top echelon of sources is included, the remainder of sources can be somewhat arbitrary to the point of raising questions regarding their inclusion. The authors can use sources that both compliment or run contrary to their arguments. At its most cynical, an author can use only those sources that support their own narrative (i.e., confirmation bias) and choose to emphasize certain sources over other sources. Again, once the primary literature is discussed, the remainder of sources is generally at the author’s discretion as is amount of emphasis. Accordingly, the sometimes-subjective nature of literature reviews can run counter to the overall scientific endeavor.

Since the nature of literature reviews has multiple problems, as well as breeding a certain level of disdain among many, why do we keep them in our scholarship? Below I propose a different manner by which to proceed with literature reviews in the future.

## A Proposal

Largely, the preceding reflects my view on literature reviews in criminology and criminal justice. Just do it. Review the key ideas, outline prior research, and include them in all manuscripts so that the odds of publication are increased. My ideas began to change on the merits of the literature review when I was still a doctoral student. At that time, I began a research assistantship within the University of Nebraska Medical School. I was assigned such dazzling tasks as editing excel worksheets on pedagogy and retention in medical schools. The most interesting project, however, was the one in which I was asked to construct a literature review on the merits of hypnosis for smoking cessation. While an interesting topic (and the cumulative research around 2002

suggested that it did not work in stopping smoking urges), I quickly discovered an interesting fact: medical journal articles did not contain traditional literature reviews. Instead, these articles had quick introductions that might utilize 2–3 references at most. In essence, they did not need the literature review to conduct and publish research findings. This meant that research articles in the medical field were only around ten pages long (in published form). As I soon discovered, this field was not alone as many other disciplines do not include literature reviews in their research articles.

While criminology is not alone in regard to required literature reviews, the focal question today is—Are these reviews really necessary? According to Mustaine and Tewksbury (2008), “editors perceive different aspects of manuscripts as more or less important or influential in their publication decisions” (p. 234). Their 2008 survey of 161 criminal justice scholars who served as reviewers for journals indicated the relative unimportance of the literature review in the decision to determine if a manuscript should be accepted, rejected, or invited to be revised and resubmitted. Their study illustrated that “the methods, clarity of the findings, and quality of the writing were the key determinants of reviewer decisions” (2008, p. 234). In a later piece that further illustrated the relative unimportance of the literature review in decisions to publish, Mustaine and Tewksbury (2016) surveyed 344 editors from journals with impact factors (Thomson Reuters’ Journal Citation Reports) across six social sciences (anthropology, communications, criminal justice, political science, public administration, and sociology). Of all the variables examined (journal fit, clarity, methods, conclusion/discussion/implication section, quality of writing, strength of findings, description of the methods, timeliness/comprehensiveness, literature review, and size of potential readership), the literature review was identified as the next to last least important criterion of an editor’s final decision on accepting the manuscript (size of potential readership was considered the overall least important factor). Per OLS regression analysis, the importance of the literature review did not indicate a statistically significant relationship with the editors’ estimation of acceptance rate. The literature review is empirically, and thus arguably, the least important section of peer-reviewed research articles.

Some could argue that in an era where there are so many journals in criminology and criminal justice (as well as sociology, law, and other related fields receptive to crime, deviance, and social justice research), literature reviews are more important today than ever. It is not possible to read all the literature out there, “much less maintain an understanding of the breadth of the field” (Walker, 1998, p. v). On the contrary, this could also indicate a need to do away with the pretense of a literature review in criminology and criminal justice. The latter option is what I advocate.

I propose that we should do away with the literature review in our discipline. This approach would allow researchers to get to their main points much quicker in articles. The abandonment of the literature review would allow for quicker dissemination of results through expediting article production. The elimination of literature reviews would allow for more articles per journal, and possibly, quicker turnaround by the entire publication machine. The remainder of this speech outlines the pros and cons of enacting this proposal.

### **Reasons for Abandoning Traditional Literature Reviews**

There are several reasons for the idea of abandoning the notion of the traditional literature review. Researchers might be able to complete more manuscripts, be more

diverse in their research, increase the intellectual value of alternative publication outlets, increase the number of articles in journal issues, increase the number of meta-analyses, create the potential for quicker reviewer and then editorial manuscript review periods, and place greater emphasis on research methods. This section of the speech explores the impact of not having literature reviews on all of these. Due to the shortened nature of manuscripts, it is anticipated that the abandonment of the traditional literature review could result in more publications. Currently, manuscripts are supposed to be around thirty pages in length. By omitting literature reviews, the page length would necessarily decrease by as much as a third of manuscript length. This would mean 7–10 fewer pages authors would have to include; pages that could be dedicated toward other publications. While I admit this is not a guarantee, ten fewer pages to edit begins to add up over multiple projects. In fairness, the extra time otherwise could be used to enhance teaching, golfing, or any other endeavor.

Additionally, authors can be more diverse in the topics they pursue. One of the things that bogs me down personally in scholarship is the literature review. My OCD kicks in heavily and I want to read everything on a subject before completing and submitting manuscripts. I do not want to be called out for having missed a source by a reviewer. I have projects that are a decade old because I have not had the time to allow my OCD to run its course. It's not a matter of being unfamiliar with the literature; it is with the conversion of it into a mere nine-page section that slows me down. Not having the constraint of a literature review would increase my output, as well as many others who have similar completest views on literature reviews.

One of the most important areas that would be affected by the lack of a literature review in research articles is the increased value of books, sourcebooks, and encyclopedias. I remember writing my first encyclopedia entry back in the day. As a Masters student, I was all perfectionist about it and trying to make sure it was the best encyclopedia entry ever written. Once it was published and I was showing it to faculty, one faculty member burst my bubble by muttering, "Too bad nobody reads encyclopedia entries." While hurtful at the time, it is in fact true. With the exception of that first entry, I have never read one of my completed encyclopedia entries. Textbooks and sourcebooks are largely similar; unless you are teaching a course with a book, generally, we do not read these sources either. By abandoning the literature review, books, encyclopedias, reference books, and even textbooks could become much more important for the field.

Another necessary impact of abandoning the literature review is to increase the number of articles per journal issue and volume. With extra space, more research can be published within a singular journal. This could be a quicker turnaround from manuscript submission to print publication; online first articles would still operate at the same speed. I think we would all agree that faster, full publication would be a good thing. While this might impact editors in the short term, the new approach would iron itself out over time (probably over the course of a single year).

If there are no literature reviews, the number of meta-analyses on criminal justice studies may increase. As noted above, literature reviews are largely a subjective device. While reviewers point out missing literature, the bulk of many literature reviews still comes from the submitting author. The inclusion of various sources is at the author's discretion, which is limited by beliefs, personal biases, and general world views. Cullen, Wright, and Blevins (2006) favored "the use of meta-analysis to organize the empirical literature"(p. 29). Meta-analysis is considered to be a more objective manner of evaluating

past research. While they were focused upon criminological theory, Cullen et al.'s (2006) notion was that meta-analyses should "be undertaken on an ongoing basis and by researchers who are independent of one another"; this would allow for the comparison of "the relative effects of the core variables" within a given subject area (p. 29). In lieu of literature reviews, meta-analyses could become more commonplace in criminology and criminal justice. Of course, any increase in meta-analyses is predicated on these studies themselves and not on the simple disappearance of literature reviews.

According to Mustaine and Tewksbury (2016), "the greatest challenge editors faced in dealing with manuscripts was slow reviewers" (p. 231). In an examination of 117 editors from the more general social sciences, Mustaine and Tewksbury (2013) examined the editor's decision to publish a manuscript or not. Slow reviewers were the number one challenge editors experienced. Without literature reviews, manuscripts going out for review will necessarily be shorter. Perhaps shorter manuscripts could hasten reviewer turnaround. If this were the case, it would be a very good shift in our disciplinary emphasis. Anything to speed up the publication process is a good thing.

The abandonment of the literature review could also have a positive impact on teaching. For over a decade I taught several undergraduate research methods classes each semester. Teaching undergraduate students to dissect research articles is a difficult process as they are trying to merge the concepts of research methods and writing. Students, especially earlier in the semester, would do all they could to avoid writing about the actual research portion of the articles. What I found occurred most often is that students would try to discuss the literature review as it is fundamentally more understandable than methods and findings sections. By abandoning the literature review, professors would be able to better emphasize the research portion of articles much more quickly; hopefully, this would also add to student understanding of research methods much more quickly. While there are several potential benefits to foregoing literature reviews in criminology and criminal justice, there are also several weaknesses to this approach. The next section explores the negative consequences of abandoning the literature review in our work.

## Consequences of Abandoning Traditional Literature Reviews

While there are multiple strengths to changing our paradigm regarding literature reviews, there are multiple potential problems to be addressed. These issues can have a profound impact on authors, editors, reviewers, and even students. I will address each in turn here.

First and foremost, without a literature review the findings of research may appear to be discombobulated. Some might argue that without the context of the literature review the findings could appear less meaningful. This is especially true for those accustomed to research having a literature review that is linked to the discussion and conclusion section. While the context issue will admittedly take some getting used to, other disciplines have clearly figured out a way to make it work. Thus, this would only be a problem in the short-term; long-term, this issue resolves itself.

As noted above, one of the strengths of dropping the literature review is the potential for more articles to be published across all journal outlets. A corollary to this is that editors and editorial staffs will necessarily have more work. If more articles can be published, more manuscripts will necessarily have to be processed through a journal's editorial office. In fact, of all the weaknesses of this approach, the logistical issue of



processing more manuscripts in the early stages of such a transition would be the most problematic. Why would any editor want to increase their workload exponentially? The simple answer is that they would not. Again, this issue would resolve itself over the first couple of years of working with no literature reviews.

In addition to the extra workload for journal offices, editors would need to be current on literature that is the focus of the journal. While this might be easier to keep up on the reading for a topically-themed journal, for example *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* or *Critical Criminology*, journals staying up-to-date with all topics under the criminological or criminal justice umbrella is nigh impossible. Yet, the abandonment of the literature review would require extra reading by editors.

It is not only editors that would be required to keep up with the literature. Editors would also have to find individual reviewers who keep up extensively with the literature. Reviewers would have to be better read just like editors. Under our current approach, editors have a difficult enough time finding experts in an area who will accept the responsibility to review and/or do so in a timely fashion. The additional burden incurred by obtaining “informed” reviewers could put a great strain on the system, especially for lower level journals. As noted above, smaller size manuscripts could be either a plus or a minus for reviewers and editors throughout the publication process. Not having informed reviewers could lead to “bad” articles being published, especially in lower ranked level journals, which would be bad.

In relation to keeping up with the literature, prospective authors must be careful to not replicate research that has shown no utility. It is inevitable that some individuals will not read anything but still design a research project and try to publish the results, prior literature be damned. This ready-fire-aim approach could very well result in individuals attempting to inadvertently engage in research that has been disproven or that has not been promising in furthering our knowledge of crime or criminal justice.

Another author issue for the omission of literature reviews has to do with the cottage industry of “the most cited criminologist.” Many individuals in this room engage in this type of research. Without a literature review, this type of research becomes more problematic, if non-existent. As noted above, books, source books, and encyclopedias necessarily take a more prominent role in the criminological discipline with literature reviews gone since these outlets will become the primary mechanisms of organizing information in our field. Instead of focusing on the “most cited criminologist” in journal articles, this area of study could transfer to these “other source” contributions. Thus, the most cited criminologist in a given area does not disappear with the extinction of the literature review. Rather, the “subject sources” will merely change from articles to books, encyclopedias, and sourcebooks.

Finally, one of the places where the abandonment of literature reviews will be felt most is by students, graduate students in particular. Both doctoral and masters students represent the next generation of academic researchers. Like those of us who read literature reviews in an area new to us, most, if not all, areas are new to graduate students. They use the literature reviews to learn. Additionally, one of the places where students cut their teeth in the publication process is in relation to the literature review. When I was a graduate student, one of the first places I was offered publication opportunities was to write the literature review for a research project. By getting rid of literature reviews, this key opportunity for graduate student scholarship will necessarily disappear. This is both good and bad. It is bad that students may lose the

opportunity to write a literature review; is could be good in the sense that the available opportunities become much more empirically driven leading to truer and more substantive experience in conducting research.

## Conclusion

The status quo is never a good reason to keep doing something. There are times when we should evaluate what we are doing and whether it still makes sense to stay on the same path. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the current state of affairs on comprehensive final exams in doctoral programs. Historically, to get out of a doctoral program, one had to do two or more comprehensive examinations. The pedagogical nature of comprehensive final exams is somewhat dubious. It is questionable that all the knowledge memorized for these exams is retained. Likewise, it is very much unlikely that an individual will ever be asked to study that heavily for a “test” and then be forced to sit anywhere from 4 to 10 h regurgitating that information (the only close corollary to this might be an appearance before a congressional body explaining the inner-workings of a grant funded project and this is unlikely for the vast majority of criminologists). Many doctoral granting programs have discontinued the use of comprehensive finals due to these pedagogical concerns. While initially this approach caused a great deal of consternation and still generates some debate in certain quarters, the abandonment of comprehensive exams continues to expand across criminological programs. It is in this vein of reflection that I form my arguments here.

We have always had literature reviews in our scholarship. Just because we have always added a literature review to our manuscripts does not mean it is the best approach in transmitting our empirical output. I propose that we abandon the literature review in criminological empiricism. Instead, we should focus our writing efforts on the research we have produced and place the emphasis on our findings, not on the research that has come before. Despite the weaknesses and consequences associated with this proposal, I believe it is an inevitable direction for our field.

In conclusion, I hope this idea does not sound as crazy as I am sure some (or many) of you might have thought coming in. I am not naïve enough to think that abandoning literature reviews in criminological theory will happen overnight. It is something we should consider, discuss, and debate toward reaching a consensual view.

Thank you for your time.

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