DOING A LITERATURE REVIEW

Enrichment Week Class – 22 SEP 2010

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AGENDA

• Basic Goals
• 3 Contexts
• Framing the “Contribution to Knowledge”
• Do’s and Don’ts
• How to Compare and Evaluate Claims
• Finding and Choosing Sources
• Good Examples

Goals of a Literature Review
(a.k.a. a Critical Review Essay)

• Summarize and Evaluate Existing “Knowledge”
  – May be knowledge beyond published literature
  – “Critical” does not mean exclusively negative; positive
    take-aways important too
• Summarize:
  – Areas of Agreement/Consensus
  – Areas of Disagreement (“Major Debates”)
  – Gaps
• Evaluate:
  – What’s Right, What’s Wrong, What’s Inconclusive.
    What’s Missing (and Important)
3 Contexts

- Stand-Alone Review
  - Goal = ascertain & describe the "state of the art"
  - Creates handy short-cut for others
- Part of Research Proposal
  - Make sure your question hasn't been answered
  - Situate your research in relation to field
  - Define likely "contribution to knowledge" or "value added"
  - Get ideas! (good hypothesis, method, case, etc.)
- Part of Final Research Report
  - Same objectives as in proposal
  - May qualify or clarify original because now you know what you found

Relation to "Contribution to Knowledge"

- Making an original contribution is not a requirement at NPS
  - But thinking about how might contribute is helpful when formulating a research proposal
- 3 Areas of Knowledge
  - Empirical (facts)
  - Theoretical (explanations)
  - Practical (policy "lessons learned")
- 2 Components of Beliefs
  - What we believe, with how much confidence
  - Bayes Theorem: update beliefs when get new info

Contribution to Knowledge – Four Possibilities

- New info
  - Wholly new facts, historical interpretation, explanation, policy proposal, method, etc.
  - Amendment or addition to existing info
- Increase confidence in existing belief
  - "Corroborate" existing theory, etc.
- Decrease confidence in existing belief
  - Challenge conventional wisdom, but not enough to overturn
- Change belief
  - Decisively refute or disprove existing idea – is rare
- A good lit review IS a contribution to knowledge!
DO'S AND DON'TS

- DO: synthesize - classify or categorize or group studies into "camps" or "schools of thought"
- DON'T: list and describe each item separately
  - structure should not be: para. 1: A says X, para. 2: B says Y, etc.
- DO: be selective and focused on what's of interest to you
- DON'T: fully summarize each item, regardless of whether contents are relevant

DO'S AND DON'TS cont.

- DO: see if others have reviewed literature
- DON'T: take their word for it on what studies say
  - Read things for yourself and reach your own judgments
- DO: get used to associating authors' names and schools of thought
  - E.g., Mearsheimer and offensive realism
- DO: take a look at how others have done it
  - Imitate what you think works well, avoid what doesn't
  - See below for suggestions

NUTS AND BOLTS

- Be able to summarize each study succinctly
  - Main question or purpose
  - Main argument (and level of certainty in it)
  - Theories used (DV, IVs, and how conceptualized and measured) and alternatives considered
  - Methods and data
- Sort into main camps or groupings
  - May differ in terms of theory, method, disciplinary background of authors, policy preferences, etc.
**NUTS AND BOLTS cont.**

- Summarize existing state of knowledge
  - Areas of consensus or near consensus
  - Areas of disagreement (the main debates)
  - Gaps (alternative theories or policies not considered, cases or data not examined)
- Evaluate
  - What's right, wrong, inconclusive, missing
  - Compare and assess:
    - Assumptions
    - Logic: alternative explanations overlooked? different chains of reasoning from premise to inference?
    - Evidence: importance of case selection
    - Methods

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**NUTS AND BOLTS, final**

- Situate own research proposal in relation to literature. Typical options include:
- Challenge conventional wisdom
  - Relevant where there is consensus
  - You make case it is problematic or premature
- Weigh in on existing debate
  - Relevant where there is major disagreement
  - Can take a side, or propose a synthesis
- Fill a gap
  - Could be alternative interpretation not considered, or body of evidence or case not examined
- Extend an existing approach or new area
  - Build on and champion an existing consensus or one perspective or approach by applying it to new topic/question/data

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**Finding Sources**

- Cast Your Net Widely
- Use the Library!
  - Not everything in print is available electronically
  - Browsing nearby call numbers useful
- Use the Internet
  - Some academic research not published yet
  - Good for government and NGO reports
  - Try multiple search sources: Google, Proquest, Lexis/Nexis
- Be Cautious with the Internet
  - Usually not peer reviewed; few obstacles to posting
  - Look for author credentials, use of citations, charged or biased language, etc.
Selecting Sources

- Too Few Sources? Look for:
  - A broader question that encompasses your narrower topic
    - If topic is suicide terrorism by Tamil women, examine research on suicide terrorism or women as terrorists
    - A general theoretical approach or method you want to apply
    - An analogy to something similar
    - If topic is preparedness to contain agro-terrorism, look at research on ability to respond to natural crop diseases

Selecting Sources cont.

- Too Many Sources? Focus on:
  - Leading authorities
    - Who is cited the most?
  - Publications in most prestigious and/or visible outlets
    - Highly ranked academic journals and presses. or publications with wide circulation (e.g., Foreign Affairs)
  - Most recent materials
  - Most relevant to you
    - Your question, empirical case, time period, etc.

- Be Selective!
  - "best on the cutting room floor"

Good Examples

- Terrorism

- Deterrence

- International Cooperation
  - Stephen Haggard and Beth A. Simmons, "Theories of International Regimes," International Organization, Vol. 41, No. 3 (June 1987): 451-517
Good Examples cont.

- Transnational Social Movements

- Revolutions

- History (origins of WWII in Pacific)

Links to My "How To" Article

- Cite:

- Links:
  - http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayFulltext?type=1&fid=386230&jid=PSC&volum eid=39&issu eid=0&aid=386229
  - http://www.cas.buffalo.edu/classes/psc/fcezgare/PSC%205094/Knopf.pdf

QUESTIONS?

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