

Stanisław Topolewski

Uniwersytet Przyrodniczo-Humanistyczny
W Siedlcach



Marcin Górniewicz

Wojskowa Akademia Techniczna
im. Jarosława Dąbrowskiego

Paweł Stawarz

Wojskowa Akademia Techniczna
im. Jarosława Dąbrowskiego

The Literature Review and the “Desk Research” Methods in Studies Conducted in Social Sciences with Particular Emphasis on Security, Political, and International Relations Studies

Introduction

The Both methods, which are the subject of cognition in this article, have been thoroughly scrutinised in many scientific disciplines. In this paper, the cognitive effort has been focused on the achievements developed in social sciences, where it is not easy to have an unambiguous definition of the “desk research” method, and there may be a kind of cognitive dissonance between this method and the literature review. According to the literal translation, it is a “desk examination”, i.e., “conducting research from behind a desk”⁴⁹⁶. In other words, sitting in the privacy of the office, reading everything that has a cognitive value and is characterised by a sufficiently high level of credibility, is desk research. It involves collecting information called “existing data”, i.e., records of already performed research, usually in the form of articles and scientific monographs or specialised reports authorised by recognised public and non-governmental institutions⁴⁹⁷. The problem is that this approach is surprisingly

⁴⁹⁶ M. Makowska. *Analiza danych zastanych. Przewodnik dla studentów*, Scholar, Warszawa 2012, p. 82.

⁴⁹⁷ A. Karcz-Czajkowska, *Desk research – jak przeprowadzić i w czym może Ci pomóc?*
<https://research.jcd.pl/desk-research-jak-przeprowadzic-i-w-czym-moze-ci-pomoc>

strongly associated with the well-known method of literature review⁴⁹⁸. So, what is the difference? In order to answer this question, a brief description of both methods is presented in the text.

The method of literature review known in the West under that name has been given many names in Polish social sciences, such as: critical literature review, literature analysis, review of written sources, critical review of written sources, etc. Regardless of the term used, this method consists of obtaining information from reading written sources that contain data already verified with varying degrees of reliability (using the language of methodology, the data contained in written sources have been previously processed using theoretical methods). In the remainder, the term “literature review method” will be applied due to the reference to the English-language name, although this method goes far beyond reaching only to literature, as discussed below.

Among the sources used in the discussed method, one can distinguish materials written and reviewed by scientists (monographs, chapters in monographs, scientific articles), expert studies reviewed by other experts (reports and analyses prepared by governmental organisations and recognised non-governmental organisations), and press materials subjected to review and verification (otherwise the medium publishing such information would expose themselves to a compensation lawsuit)⁴⁹⁹. Unverified materials, such as information portals, blogs, vlogs, and forum posts, are also used as auxiliaries. It is worth emphasising that the latter do not constitute a reliable source of data on the subject of cognition, but they allow for getting acquainted with public opinion on issues belonging to the scope of the subject of cognition. For example, having knowledge from several scientific positions and government reports on the subject of cognition, thanks to the review of unverified materials on this subject posted in the virtual space, information on the attitude of authors and people reading entries (e.g., through a review of comments) to this subject of cognition can be obtained. It may then turn out that a specific picture of a given subject emerges from reliable sources, but public opinion adopts a completely different perspective on the given issue⁵⁰⁰.

⁴⁹⁸ J. W. Creswell, *Projektowanie badań naukowych, Metody jakościowe, ilościowe i mieszane*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2013, pp. 49–62.

⁴⁹⁹ J. Zieliński, *Metodologia pracy naukowej*, Warszawa 2012, pp. 56–60.

⁵⁰⁰ B. Glinka, & W. Czakon. *Podstawy badań jakościowych*. PWE, Warszawa 2021, pp. 115–118.

Referring to the topic taken up due to the use of already processed (verified) data in the discussed method, one can find supporters of including this method in the set of theoretical methods. However, due to its use to collect data subjected by the author of the research to further, independent processing, one can also find supporters of including this method in the set of empirical methods. The dispute over whether the literature review method can be described more as empirical or theoretical seems unresolved because it depends on the adopted perspective:

- whether it should be considered that the method is empirical because it allows for obtaining data at the beginning of own research, which will be processed (therefore, from the perspective of a given researcher, the obtained data is empirical because he uses theoretical methods to process these data);
- or is it worth acknowledging the theoretical nature of this method, given that the obtained data have already been processed by verification (e.g., in a published scientific source).

It is worth taking a closer look at the criterion distinguishing empirical methods from theoretical ones, just as quantitative and qualitative methods are distinguished depending on the criterion of the chosen data processing method. In the case of the division into theoretical and empirical methods, a seemingly unambiguous criterion is used (unambiguity is one of the fundamental conditions of the so-called logical division) referring to the nature of examined data. Empirical methods are to be used to collect data (without performing any other activities), while theoretical methods should be used to process the collected empirical material to verify the assumed hypotheses (if any), obtain answers to the research questions, and achieve the adopted research objectives. However, it turns out that even if such a seemingly indisputable criterion is applied, there is a problem with the qualification of the literature review method. Ultimately, the authors would tend to classify this method as empirical or, possibly, mixed. Doubts are raised by the adopted perspective in relation to the collected data – because from the author’s perspective, even if the collected data have already been processed (e.g., their reliability was methodologically verified), for another author these will be data with which he comes into contact for the first time and will not duplicate them further in an unchanged form, but will also process them by using, for instance, methods of analysis and comparison with other data. On the other hand, the obtained data are already the result of processing, so they are not completely new, so they require verification anyway. Therefore, it can be assumed that if the author does not process these data, but uses them in an

unchanged form, without making a comparison with other data, it would indeed be theoretical data. However, if the researcher performed any activities on these data, including their processing by theoretical methods, in this particular study these data would be empirical. Therefore, the method of using these data in one's own research seems crucial in deciding on the qualification of the literature review method as empirical or theoretical.

Quantitative vs. Qualitative Methods

Using the criterion of dividing research methods into qualitative and quantitative, it seems that the qualification of the "literature review" is obvious, given the basis of qualitative data, their further processing, and formulation of conclusions also in a qualitative form⁵⁰¹. However, an attempt may be made to quantify the data contained in the items, including the data contained in descriptive form⁵⁰². However, it is absolutely necessary to read the examined content before making its quantitative record. Therefore, it seems reasonable to classify this method as qualitative, although after processing the collected data, the conclusions can be expressed in figures. In this case, it will only be a form of a summary of the results obtained in the course of qualitative data processing.

Desk Research

"Desk research" is a compilation of several different methods, namely the empirical method of literature review and theoretical methods for processing previously collected empirical material such as: analysis, synthesis, and comparison. It happens that part of "desk research" also reaches for inference methods when formulating conclusions, but the classical approach no longer includes the stage of formulating conclusions, thus solving research problems, verifying hypotheses, and achieving the assumed objectives⁵⁰³.

Using the example of reading ten monographs thematically embedded in the subject of cognition, one can see different perspectives and methodological approaches, as well as get acquainted with the results achieved by the authors of these works formulated in the form of conclusions. Therefore, by reviewing the literature, one can gain extensive knowledge about what has already been achieved in a given subject of cognition, thus generating specific

⁵⁰¹ J. W. Creswell, *Projektowanie badań...*, op. cit., . pp. 46–62.

⁵⁰² E. Babbie. *Badania społeczne w praktyce*. PWN, Warszawa 2005, pp. 48–50.

⁵⁰³ L. Hofferth, Secondary Data Analysis in Family Research. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67(4)/ 2005, pp. 891–907.

knowledge. The second step is to process the collected knowledge to obtain the most objective and, as a result, reliable conclusions. In practice, it means that it is necessary to identify the content contained in the read items, significant in the context of the chosen object of cognition⁵⁰⁴. Therefore, it is worth noting these contents in a separate sheet, which can be called an analysis sheet. After collecting the data, it may turn out that many of these contents extracted from individual items overlap (in whole or to a large extent). Thus, by juxtaposing these contents, the researcher uses the method of comparison and again, on a separate sheet, can write down his comments and observations⁵⁰⁵. Usually, if a literature review was used in relation to a sufficiently large number of written items, it may indeed turn out that it will be necessary to unify the collected content by adopting a “bird’s eye” view in the opposite way than in the case of the analysis method, where the read content was deconstructed into the primary elements to identify, describe, and ensure that the researcher has considered all the elements of this content necessary in the conducted research. Therefore, the next step is to synthesise previously analysed and compared content⁵⁰⁶. Then, the researcher gains as complete as possible a picture of the knowledge of what has been done so far in the object of cognition adopted in his own research⁵⁰⁷.

Therefore, correctly used “desk research” will be a component of four independently functioning methods: literature review, analysis, comparison, and synthesis. The last three, undoubtedly theoretical, could then be supported by appropriate notes in the form of sheets as tools corresponding to those methods. It should be emphasised that so far, the vast majority of representatives of various social sciences disciplines have not developed separate questionnaires of applied theoretical methods, making all the described research activities “in thought”. The authors of this article also belong to this group. However, due to the adopted subject matter, the authors cannot subject themselves to legitimate criticism and not indicate potentially the correct approach to the use of theoretical methods.

The following tables present examples of forms of sheets that seem to match the mentioned methods: analysis, comparison, and synthesis. Their use would ensure research

⁵⁰⁴ J. Stochaj, & Ł. Roman, Wybrane metody teoretyczne w naukach społecznych i ich zastosowanie. *Obronność - Zeszyty Naukowe Wydziału Zarządzania i Dowodzenia Akademii Obrony Narodowej*, 2 (6)/ 2013, pp. 178–197.

⁵⁰⁵ J. Zieliński, *Metodologia pracy...*, op. cit., p. 46.

⁵⁰⁶ W. Pytkowski. *Organizacja badań i ocena prac naukowych*. PWN, Warszawa 1985, p. 114.

⁵⁰⁷ S. Nowak, *Metodologia badań społecznych*. PWN, Warszawa 1985, pp. 19–41.

process transparency, so desirable in the methodology, and, at the same time, would protect researchers from unwanted research subjectivisation.

The authors' proposal of questionnaires for theoretical methods: analysis, comparison, and synthesis.

Table 1. A questionnaire for analysis:

Content identification	Content concerning the subject of cognition
Article 1	1.
	2.
Article 2	1.
Monograph 1	1.

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2. A questionnaire for comparison:

Content comparison	Content 1	Content 2	Content 3
Article 1	No change	Differences: ...	No change
Article 2	Differences: ...	No change	Differences: ...
Monograph 1	No change	No change	No change

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3. A questionnaire for standardised content synthesis:

Content unification	Content 1	Content 2	Content 3
Article 1	No change	Content with modification: ...	No change

Article 2	With modification: ...	No change	With modification: ...
Monograph 1	No change	No change	No change

Source: own elaboration.

Table 4. A questionnaire for non-standardised content synthesis:

Non-standardised content:	Reasons preventing content standardisation for all sources	Evaluation of the methodological and substantive basis of the content credibility	Reasons that should follow to standardise content
Content 3			
Content 4			
Content 5			

Source: own elaboration.

Conclusions

The so-called “desk research” method is indeed a separate method because it draws on four other methods and uses their combinations to produce original results. This method cannot be classified as a technique (i.e., sub-method) because in the face of recourse to the workshop of four different and equivalent methods, it would be unjustified from a methodological perspective. Simultaneously, it is worth emphasising that the use of the “desk research” method means that indicating the use of this method together with the literature review method would be justified only if “literature review” was used to examine a part of the material, and “desk research” to examine another. Otherwise, it could constitute a methodologically unjustified repetition causing terminological chaos in the part describing the research methodology adopted in the study.

Streszczenie:

W naukach społecznych granica terminologiczna pomiędzy metodą przeglądu literatury a „desk research” jest stosunkowo płynna, co powoduje liczne rozbieżności, interpretacje i definicje tych pojęć. Ze względu na mnogość dyscyplin w tej dziedzinie, wśród których warto wymienić nauki o bezpieczeństwie, nauki o polityce i nauki o stosunkach międzynarodowych, konieczne wydaje się określenie zakresu metodologicznego i terminologicznego zastosowania tej właśnie metody w szeroko rozumianych naukach społecznych (ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem wymienionych dyscyplin ze względu na specyfikę przedmiotu poznania). Artykuł poświęcony jest uzgodnieniom terminologicznym pozwalającym odpowiedzieć na pytanie: Jaka jest różnica i zakres stosowania metod „przeglądu literatury” i „desk research” w naukach społecznych? Przyjętym celem było opracowanie oryginalnych propozycji kwestionariuszy do analizy, porównania i syntezy, które mogłyby posłużyć jako narzędzia pomocnicze w przetwarzaniu materiału empirycznego zebranego w drodze przeglądu literatury.

Słowa kluczowe:

metodologia, metodologia badań, metoda badawcza, przegląd literatury,
badania desk research

Keywords:

methodology, research methodology, research method, literature review, desk research

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