Literature Review – Synthesis
What does it mean to synthesize articles?

Synthesizing articles can be the most difficult part of writing a literature review. It is not just a simple summary of each article you identify as important to your topic.

To synthesize, you must:
• Analyze articles in terms of the importance to your own research question.
• Compare and contrast issues as they relate to themes and/or theories in your own topic.
• Identify differences and similarities and integrate them into your literature review.

Simple example
For example, suppose you were investigating prevention and treatment for the common cold virus. You may include in your literature review a paragraph such as this:

Wolowitz (2015) states that Vitamin C is most effective when used to prevent common colds. Hofstadter (2017) suggests that Vitamin C in conjunction with oral doses of zinc are the most effective method of preventing colds. Farrah-Fowler & Cooper (2017) argue that Vitamin C is useful for prevention but not for treatment. Their study also shows that Echinacea is possibly more effective at treatment than prevention.

This short paragraph shows how each study relates to the others and presents similarities and differences about the therapies used to treat colds.

Actual Examples
Below are actual synthesized examples excerpted from an article on the topic of compassion fatigue. They illustrate how the authors synthesized the literature to present what is known and what is not known about compassion fatigue in mental health professionals.

Note how the authors highlight similarities and differences and organize the review by themes such as trauma.

Synthesized example excerpt 1, p. 172

Compassion fatigue has also been distinguished from burnout, which is psychological and emotional exhaustion, associated with feelings of hopelessness and difficulties in dealing with work or in doing your job effectively, sometimes in the context of high workloads or a nonsupportive work environment (Stamm, 2010). It is also associated with a reduction in a sense of professional accomplishment (Maslach, 1982).

Synthesized example excerpt 2, p. 174-177

The factor most commonly associated with compassion fatigue was participants’ own experiences of traumatic life events, with six studies reporting that higher compassion fatigue was related to previous trauma (Deighton, Gurris, & Traue, 2007; Killian, 2008; MacRitchie & Leibowitz,
One study reported higher compassion fatigue in participants who had been exposed to violent crime (MacRitchie & Leibowitz, 2010). Nelson-Gardell and Harris (2003) use the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire (CTQ); Bernstein & Fink, 1998) to assess past trauma experience. The CTQ comprises five subscales of childhood trauma: Emotional Abuse, Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Emotional Neglect, and Physical Neglect. All CTQ subscales were associated with higher compassion fatigue (Jacobson, 2012). The fact that this study reported that number of stressful life experiences was not related to compassion fatigue suggest that there is something specific about traumatic events that leaves clinicians more vulnerable to compassion fatigue.


This entire article is a narrative review and has many more examples. To read the entire article, click on the permalink: