English 102
Literature Review Samples

The following two excerpts are typical of social science research articles, which usually have a section devoted to summarizing the relevant work on the topic to date. Humanities and natural science research articles usually have something comparable. The goal is to show that the author of the current study is up to speed in the field, to identify work that the current research draws on, whether for facts or for theoretical perspectives, to pin down the points that most experts already agree on and to point out gaps or disagreements in the existing literature, which the present study would hope to resolve or address in some way.

Note that the “debate” in both these examples is not so much a disagreement but simply a lack of research on certain aspects of the problem, which the author(s) will attempt to address.

Literature Review


Gangs serve a valuable role in the development and socialization of an individual as they seek the approval of their peers and their identities (Regan, 1996). Acceptance and identity is provided by the gang and thus makes membership an attractive possibility. Regan (1996) further notes that in addition to peers, gang membership is also influenced by the individual’s relationship with the family, community, school, and the individual’s personal needs and characteristics.

When the family is unable to provide for the needs and emotional development of the individual, the gang becomes a surrogate family (Cox, 1996; Joe & Chesney-Lind, 1995) and fulfills the needs not being meet by the family such as activities, affection, loyalty, and sense of belonging (Curry & Decker, 1998; Landre, Miller & Porter, 1997; Regan, 1996). The lack of family organization (Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Battin-Pearson, 1999) and lack of supervision (Bowker & Klein, 1983; Curry & Decker, 1998) are also cited as reasons for gang membership.

Individuals who reside in socially disorganized low income communities (Bowker & Klein, 1983; Curry & Decker, 1998; Fagan, 1996) are more likely to become gang members, particularly if a gang exists in the neighborhood (Curry & Spergel, 1992) and there is a high incidence of violence and crime (Fagan, 1996; Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Battin-Pearson, 1999). An individual’s decision to become a gang member is also influenced by having peers who are gang members (Frauenglass, Routh, Pantin & Mason, 1997; Lattimore, Visher & Linster, 1995). Lastly, individuals who experience academic difficulties (Curry & Spergel, 1992; Thornberry, 1998) and low commitment to school (Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Battin-Pearson, 1999) are at increased risk for gang membership.

The culmination of these factors have been studied and documented by past research efforts as explanations for gang membership. There is agreement in the literature that risk factors for gang membership can be classified into the 5 categories of family, community, school, peers, and individual (Hill, Howell, Hawkins & Battin-Pearson, 1999). The literature, however, is devoid of gang research which defines the degree of association for various risk factors and the independent and combined relationship of these agents to gang membership based upon the age of the individual.
Background Theory and Literature


Among bereavement professionals and scholars, there has been a noticeable movement toward embracing the concept of “meaning making” as an important process for grieving persons. Stroebe and Schut (2001) observed in their recent review article on models of coping with bereavement, “one of the most significant new developments in the study of bereavement has been a recognition of grieving as a process of meaning reconstruction” (p. 391). They added, “Bereaved people develop ‘narratives’ about the nature of the deceased’s life and death, and these ‘social constructions’ themselves can affect the outcome of grief” (p. 392). In other words, how bereaved individuals construe their loss experiences may affect subsequent adaptation during their grief trajectories.

Some of the increased emphasis on meaning making in bereavement comes from the theory of constructivism championed most notably by Neimeyer (1998, 2000b). As a post-modern way of understanding the experience of loss, Neimeyer’s meaning reconstruction is an effort to evolve beyond formulaic stage or task-based models. Instead, this approach places the individual mourner, with her interpretive efforts to “make sense” of life, at center stage in the drama of human mourning. Meaning reconstruction concerns itself not only with the griever’s effort to find an explanation for the death but also with the griever’s quest to realign her models of self and the world in light of the loss. The self narrative or life story is the vehicle through which these meaning making processes occur. Neimeyer argued that loss challenges the coherence of the griever’s life story, thus forcing revisions in her understanding of the world and her place in it.

Additional impetus for meaning making in bereavement comes from certain schools of psychotherapy when their methods are applied to problems of loss. The narrative processes model of psychotherapy is one of these (Angus, Levitt, & Hardtke, 1999). A key goal of this approach is reflective analysis of a person’s life experiences, such as death of a loved one. Meanings that either support or challenge implicit beliefs about self and others that underscore the person’s dominant life narrative are of particular interest. Healing is thought to emerge from a dialogue between client and therapist, a co-constructive process in which life events are woven into a coherent story that both (re)organizes and represents that person’s sense of self and others in the world. Recent chapters by Neimeyer (2000a) and Neimeyer and Levitt (2001) illustrated several techniques for how narrative “repair” can be undertaken when adverse life events such as loss disrupt the flow and meaning of an individual’s self-constructed life story.

As clinicians and scientists, we share this growing interest in meaning-making efforts (or lack thereof) among mourners. The principal drive behind our research program is to understand why and how some griever seem to fare so well whereas others founder in anguish and misery. We encounter the latter most often in our clinical practices and, therefore, are constantly striving to assist those less able to adjust following a loss. From the former, we want to learn “how they do it” to discover what tactics, strategies, methods, or behaviors facilitate adaptive grieving. Meaning making is part of that spectrum of potentially adaptive behaviors. Ultimately, in the spirit of conducting research that matters (Jordan, 2000), we hope to apply any lessons learned about adaptation to the clinical enterprise of helping troubled mourners by introducing them to what has “worked” for others who have experienced a painful loss.

[The last paragraph deals with methodology, though it too is focused on relating this research project to earlier ones by explaining how the methods used here compare to others.]