

## Reading Review Articles (e.g., Magee & Smith, 2013)

### The Big Picture

Review articles can have three different purposes; usually writers make theirs fit one of these descriptions: (1) To review a lot of relevant empirical findings to see if some broad conclusions can be drawn from a body of empirical studies. This might lead to confirmation, refutation, or to suggested modifications to existing theories. The Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) paper is an example of this; you can probably guess this by reading its abstract and last section. A review paper could also be to suggest new (and perhaps broader) interpretations of existing research than prior and perhaps unrelated points of view. For example, Heine, Proulx and Vohs (2006) proposed the Meaning Maintenance Model, which basically holds that people constantly need to make meaning for themselves about the social world and so they are always interpreting events towards that aim. In doing so, they subsumed dissonance theory, terror management theory, self-affirmation theory and others. Incidentally, this thesis was not popular with all the authors of these theories. My take on that is that the original theorists liked the particulars of their theories and did not appreciate having their hard work apparently subsumed in a broader point of view. Because I like parsimony and abstraction, I like the MMM, but I do still appreciate the unique contribution of the theories from which it was derived. This example shows that theory matters in interpreting results, and why social psychologists have to do so much work to convince readers that the way they conduct studies is appropriate to the theory.

(2) To propose a new theory, spell out its main thesis and tenets, and show what evidence there is for it, and what new research questions the theory generates. This is how I would categorize Magee and Smith (2013).

(3) (This one is much rarer.) To identify what is missing in a literature or research on some phenomenon or a general topic. You will read this type when you read Pratto (2016).

### Getting Down to Reading

#### *Orienting Yourself*

A useful procedure is to try to orient yourself with a kind of overview of the article by reading the abstract 1-2 times and then skimming over at least the sections. You might also want to read the general discussion or conclusions section at the end of the paper.

#### *Digging In*

Then, it's time to dig in. A review is going to cite lots of names and prior research. Hopefully if there is a specific method or paradigm that is important, they will give a little synopsis of it in the text. In some ways, the reference section of a review becomes an encyclopedia of relevant research, or at least more than "greatest hits." This is why they can be so dense to read, and it is also why those reference sections are very useful for people looking for research on a subtopic or related topic as the paper addresses.

If the review is well-written, its arguments should still be clear even if you skip over the citations because you haven't read them anyway. An introduction should tell you what the paper is about and what the authors want it to do. If you are lucky they will outline of the rest of the paper, maybe at the end of the review.

One of the big jobs the authors have done is to organize the literature. This is going to form the basis of the sections. In the Magee and Smith (2013) paper, the sections addressing particular ideas or phenomena are labeled with headings, and within each, they stick to research directly relevant. So in a way, you could consider each of those like a mini-paper because they have a thesis and they describe relevant research for it. If you want to know what they are saying, reading the very beginning and very end of those sections should summarize the ideas. After you read a section, to remember the points, you might write that down or you might check what the topic sentences of first and last paragraph say.

#### *Re-evaluating the big picture and thesis*

Many review papers work like this: After they describe research relevant to each little point, they have to bring all the ideas back together. They will probably have an overarching thesis and in an integration section, they will want to show how each little piece fits with the whole big idea or thesis of the paper. If they began the paper criticizing another theoretical point of view, like the Rudert and Griefeneder (2016) paper you read, then they are going to re-address that in light of the research evidence they presented. Although it is fact-based, a review paper is still a persuasive essay, and so it will argue the superiority of its assertions, or just make them, in addition to presenting research facts that are consistent with it. It would not have scientific integrity to leave out results that contract the authors' assertions. Those should be included and addressed in some way. For example, the authors might say whether the contradictory findings might not be contradictory after all because the methods or participants were different, or they might be truly contradictory and point to the need for better theory, modifications of theory, etc.

So, while you are reading along, how much you agree with the arguments, and how much you don't agree, can think of alternatives, don't find the research they cite to be all that convincing, don't think it was thorough or think it was misinterpreted, is going to be germane to how much you are going to agree with their big conclusion (the one they want to convince you about). These kinds of thoughts while reading are good; they show engagement of your knowledge and reasoning with the authors' ideas and material. Of course this can make reading a whole long paper take some time. You don't have to read it in one sitting, and probably you shouldn't.

#### References

- Heine, S. J., Proulx, T., & Vohs, K. K. (2006). The meaning maintenance model: On the coherence of social motivations. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 10 88-110. doi: 10.1207/s15327957pspr1002\_1
- Pettigrew, T. F. & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90, 751-783. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.90.5.751
- Pratto, F. (Dec. 22, 2015 on line). On power and empowerment. *British Journal of Social Psychology*. DOI: 0.1111/bjso.12135
- Rudert, S. C. & Griefeneder, R. (2016). When it's okay that I don't play: Social norms and the situated construal of social exclusion. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 42, 955-969.