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The importance of previous studies and some of the most important criteria for their contemporary methodological classification: A general epistemological introduction

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Abstract---This article explores the epistemological and methodological significance of previous studies within the framework of scientific research, emphasizing their essential role in defining, refining, and contextualizing research troubles. It proclaims that reviewing existing literature is seldom a procedural step but a foundational intellectual activity that enables researchers to situate their work within a continuum of accumulated knowledge. The study debates the definition, classification, and methodological use of research sources and references whether traditional, electronic, or field-based, and also highlights their role in identifying research gaps that drive innovation and originality. Through an analytical and critical approach, the paper presents various methods for classifying previous studies, including chronological, thematic, and methodological approaches, each reflecting a distinct dimension of the research gap (temporal, thematic, or methodological). It further examines the debate between Arab and Western academic traditions regarding the inclusion of previous studies within either the methodological or theoretical framework of research.

Keywords---Previous studies, methodological framework, theoretical framework, epistemology, scientific research methodology, academic writing.

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Introduction

Researchers interested in scientific research methods regardless of whether their approach is theoretical, applied, or both affirm that what has come to be known as "research literature" or "previous studies" represents a fundamental stage in the process of formulating or refining a research problem. Besides, it helps, in turn, to define the features of the studied phenomenon in a rational manner, thereby directly or indirectly contributing to saving time and effort. We would not be exaggerating, within this epistemological framework, to assert that it occupies a central position in shaping the most appropriate method for presenting and addressing a scientific research problem. It should be noted, however, that the strength and depth of this cognitive strategy vary according to the researcher's skill and experience in research methodology and ethics. From our side, within this complex cognitive framework and in light of our foundational interests, we have endeavored to adopt an analytical and critical approach to certain concepts and theories related to some proposed definitions including those concerning previous studies, their classification, and the strategies suggested for employing them in an original and creative way to serve the objectives of research. Within this epistemological context, our scientific problem has been formulated as follows: What are the most prominent methodological criteria related to how previous studies can be reviewed and employed in an original and creative way, based on the methodology of research gaps?

Definition of Research Sources and References:

The definitions related to research sources and references have diversified, whether directly or indirectly connected to the research problem. In scientific methodology literature, they are often referred to by several terms such as previous studies or research literature, which in English correspond to expressions like Related Research, Related Literature, or Reviewing the Literature. These can be summarized as follows:

- "Previous studies refer to those scientific works approved by competent authorities such as universities, institutes, research centers, and official bodies, and which have been peer-reviewed according to globally and locally recognized scientific standards. They are connected to one or more aspects of the study conducted by the researcher." (Maimouna, 2010, p. 167)
- "They are the accumulated prior works carried out by previous scholars and researchers within the research literature relevant to each researcher. The researcher conducts a precise survey of the previous studies that help in selecting the variables within their area of interest, avoiding repetition of work already completed, and thereby making previous studies the foundation for subsequent studies and research." (Abdelwahab, 2013, p. 59)

In the context of research sources and references, especially under the growing dominance of information technology there has emerged in the digital age what is termed 'electronic information sources', defined as:

- "Non-paper sources stored electronically when produced by their creators or publishers in database files and information banks, available to users either through direct online access or locally within a library or information center via CD-ROM systems."
- "They are the various previous human efforts that have explored the same topic being researched, or approached it from one of its aspects, under certain circumstances, and published in any form, provided that they possess scientific value." (Khidr, 2013, p. 145)

In this logical context, researcher Merzougui Badr Eddine proposes a methodological and epistemological definition of the term previous studies in the field of scientific research, which can be summarized as follows: "They constitute the totality of scientific and intellectual production, methodologically classified as paper-based sources and references (old, modern, or contemporary), or non-paper sources (oral or audiovisual), or electronic ones, whether freely accessible or paid, available or newly developed for researchers."

Sources for Conceptualizing the Research Problem:

There is no doubt that the process of reading, reviewing, and then evaluating previous studies requires a methodological classification of the available sources and references, which are divided into primary sources, secondary sources, and field or procedural sources. The main types of sources and references that researchers rely on in the process of systematic research and exploration can be listed as follows:

1. **Reference Books:** these are usually classified based on a bibliographic guide published by experienced researchers or research institutions in multiple languages. Such guides contain lists of books across various scientific and intellectual fields, categorized by specialization. They assist researchers in identifying published scientific materials in terms of their topics, fields, and publication dates.
2. **Dictionaries, Linguistic Lexicons, Encyclopedias, and Renowned Scientific Compendiums:** these may be general or specialized, printed or electronic, freely accessible or paid. They help the researcher define linguistic and terminological concepts and scientific data relevant to the topic and field of study.
3. **Abstracts:** Researchers can find these in most universities and national and international scientific research centers.
4. **Scientific and Specialized Periodicals and Journals (Peer-Reviewed**): Whether national or international, some researchers consider these more important than scientific books because they provide the latest research findings, both theoretical and applied—especially empirical (quantitative) research. Others, however, believe that specialized scientific books can offer deeper and more comprehensive information than research articles that often focus on narrower topics, especially when limited to small samples, for example.
5. **Master's and Doctoral Theses:** available in print within university libraries or faculties (depending on their systems), and electronically in databases (such as the internet) dedicated to doctoral students.
6. **Mass Media, Documentary Films, and Short Films:** these allow researchers to explore past and present events, facts, and phenomena that can, in some cases, inspire and guide them toward stimulating research topics and problems.
7. **The World Wide Web (Internet):** especially through the use of specialized search applications that help locate recent sources and references directly or indirectly related to the researcher's study topic.
8. **Academic and Associative Experiences:** this includes attending lectures (in person or online), engaging in individual or group discussions in classrooms (theoretical or practical) or beyond such as short-term internships, field visits to institutions and research centers, participation in training workshops and national or international conferences, and involvement (temporary or permanent) in research laboratories and scientific or cultural associations as part of voluntary, educational, and lifelong learning activities.
9. **Scientific and Cognitive Theories and Approaches:** also known as the theoretical and conceptual research gap, these consist of sets of terms, definitions, and propositions related to each other that form a coherent vision of a phenomenon aimed at explaining and predicting it. The approach (according to adopted Arabic translations) is understood as a mental process that does not necessarily involve visible, systematized stages typical of technical or strictly scientific methods. Moreover, it can rather be seen as an intellectual stance marked by flexibility, caution, and epistemological alertness, associated with a fluid mental and psychological state whether in the preliminary or subsequent conceptualization of a topic or in the method of observation. For example, the clinical approach contrasts with the rigidity of the experimental method. Nevertheless, there exists a vital and dialectical relationship of mutual influence between theory (regardless of its strength) and scientific research (Grawitz, 2001, p. 353).
10. **National and International Conferences:** these are undoubtedly rich environments for exchanging experiences and expertise. Attending national and international conferences and seminars, listening to discussions, and participating alongside researchers from various disciplines

and countries, near or far, directly or indirectly contributes to the researcher's intellectual and psychological maturity. Ultimately, this opens new scientific and cognitive horizons related to their current or future research projects.

11. **Coincidence or Inspiration:** many scientific experiences have shown that coincidence or inspiration has been behind numerous revolutionary discoveries and innovations throughout human history. Inasmuch as, a person, especially a thinker or researcher may encounter certain situations that inspire them to successfully formulate, understand, or even propose an effective solution to an unforeseen research problem. For instance, theoretical or field studies may inspire experienced researchers with original and creative ideas about a problem, and history offers many such examples.

The Importance of Previous Studies and the Justifications for Their Selection:

The main aspects of the importance and rationale for selecting previous studies can be summarized in the following points:

- Saving the researcher's time and effort in the research process, as well as in selecting the methodological and theoretical framework of the study.
- Alerting the researcher during the writing process, by preventing them from making the same mistakes committed by previous researchers whether in the methodological organization of the study or in its final written form.
- Providing the researcher with results, recommendations, and proposals, whether theoretical, practical, or both. Equipping the researcher with a comprehensive set of references and sources that may sufficiently serve their research purpose.
- Previous studies help the researcher identify sources and references closely related to or directly relevant to their chosen research topic, thereby allowing them to select what best suits their scientific project.
- Serving as a methodological guide that enables the researcher directly or indirectly to become aware of the various differences, divergences, or overlaps in scientific and intellectual perspectives. This, in turn, allows for comparison between previous studies and the current research, facilitating constructive critique of those studies within the limits of the researcher's intellectual capacity and research experience.

How to Classify Previous Studies:

In classifying previous studies, researchers based on the concept of research gaps, propose several methods commonly used in postgraduate research, as follows:

- **Chronological Classification or the Time-Wise Research Gap:** also known as the historical method for presenting previous studies. In this approach, the researcher attempts to collect all studies related to their research topic and then organizes them chronologically according to their age, novelty, or date of writing, arranging them based on their publication dates.
- **Classification by Title or the Thematic Research Gap**: this method involves presenting previous studies by themes or topics. The researcher identifies the specific themes to be studied, gathers and classifies them accordingly, summarizes each one briefly, and provides commentary or critical reflection on each title and study.
- **Methodological Classification or the Methodological Research Gap:** in this type, the researcher classifies previous studies according to the nature of the scientific method used, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed (Fallah, 2019, p. 386).

How to Methodologically Utilize Previous Studies:

There is a difference between Arab and Western researchers regarding the inclusion of previous studies in research papers and theses specifically whether they should be part of the methodological or the theoretical framework. Traditionally, in Arab universities, previous studies are classified within the methodological framework, whereas most Western universities prefer to include them in the theoretical

framework. Furthermore, some researchers believe that previous studies can be used both in the theoretical and applied sections, particularly when presenting and interpreting results.

From our perspective, this remains a matter of choice, provided that the review of previous studies is careful, methodical, consultative, and constructively critical, especially regarding those related to one or more variables of the research topic. However, it is essential to present the key features of previous studies in a summarized and organized manner as follows:

- Full title of the study Name and surname of the researcher, with the name and surname of the supervisor in the case of a master's or doctoral thesis.
- Field of specialization.
- **Place of study**: university, institute, higher school, or research center Time period: the duration of the research or study, assuming that the longer the duration, the deeper the study tends to be.
- **Research problem:** the main question and the subsidiary questions.
- **Methodology of the study:** the nature of the adopted method, the theory or approach used, the operational and terminological definitions of concepts, final hypotheses, tools, and sample characteristics.
- Main objectives of the study, with a presentation of the key results, emphasizing the scientific and methodological contributions of the research.
- Main challenges or obstacles encountered before or during the study and how they were temporarily or permanently overcome.
- A brief critique of the study, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses such as the coherence between the problem and the research plan, the suitability of the method with the sample and objectives, the originality and objectivity of the topic, and its relevance to the specialized research field.

All these methodological and epistemological considerations are commonly known in methodological literature as "commentary on previous studies." Finally, it is important to highlight some of the main strengths (current or future) embodied in the chosen topic, especially regarding the degree of originality and creativity, whether explicit or implicit, in the research problem that the study seeks to establish directly or indirectly. This is what is known as the concept of the "research gap." (Wyllie, 2019, p. 02)

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes evident that consulting and analyzing previous studies is not merely an optional step, but rather an essential and indispensable requirement for every researcher, whether novice or experienced. These studies represent the methodological and epistemological gateway through which the researcher enters the world of scientific inquiry. They constitute the intellectual foundation upon which the research problem is built and developed, whether in its preliminary or final form. Through a careful review of previous studies, the researcher is able to trace the evolution of ideas and concepts, identify what has already been explored, and detect the gaps or deficiencies that still require further investigation. In this way, previous studies contribute not only to the construction of the theoretical and methodological framework of the research, but also to the refinement of the researcher's analytical and critical skills, enabling them to position their work within the continuum of accumulated scientific knowledge. Furthermore, previous studies allow the researcher to avoid unnecessary repetition of past works and instead focus on innovation and originality. They serve as a compass guiding the researcher toward the most relevant sources, methods, and approaches, while shedding light on the strengths and weaknesses of earlier research efforts. This process is crucial in establishing a clear, coherent, and logically grounded research problem, capable of contributing meaningfully to the advancement of scientific thought. However, the true value of previous studies lies not only in the act of citation or reference, but rather in the way they are read, classified, and utilized. The process must be guided by a strategic and systematic vision, characterized by patience, depth, and

critical discernment. The researcher must approach the literature with a spirit of intellectual curiosity, objectivity, and constructive criticism, seeking not just to summarize, but to understand, evaluate, and build upon what others have achieved. Therefore, the selection, classification, and methodological employment of sources and references should rest on well-founded justifications, reflecting a conscious and deliberate research strategy. This strategy should encompass an analytical, reflective, and evaluative reading of the world of ideas, people, and phenomena whether directly or indirectly related to the research topic and the researcher's long-term objectives. In this light, previous studies become much more than a simple academic requirement; they transform into a living intellectual dialogue between the researcher and the collective scientific heritage. They allow for a continuous process of knowledge renewal and epistemological growth, which ultimately enriches the quality of scientific research and strengthens its relevance to both academic and societal contexts. Thus, whether the researcher works individually or as part of a multidisciplinary team, a deep, strategic, and critical engagement with previous studies remains a cornerstone for achieving originality, scientific rigor, and epistemological maturity in any research endeavor.

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