

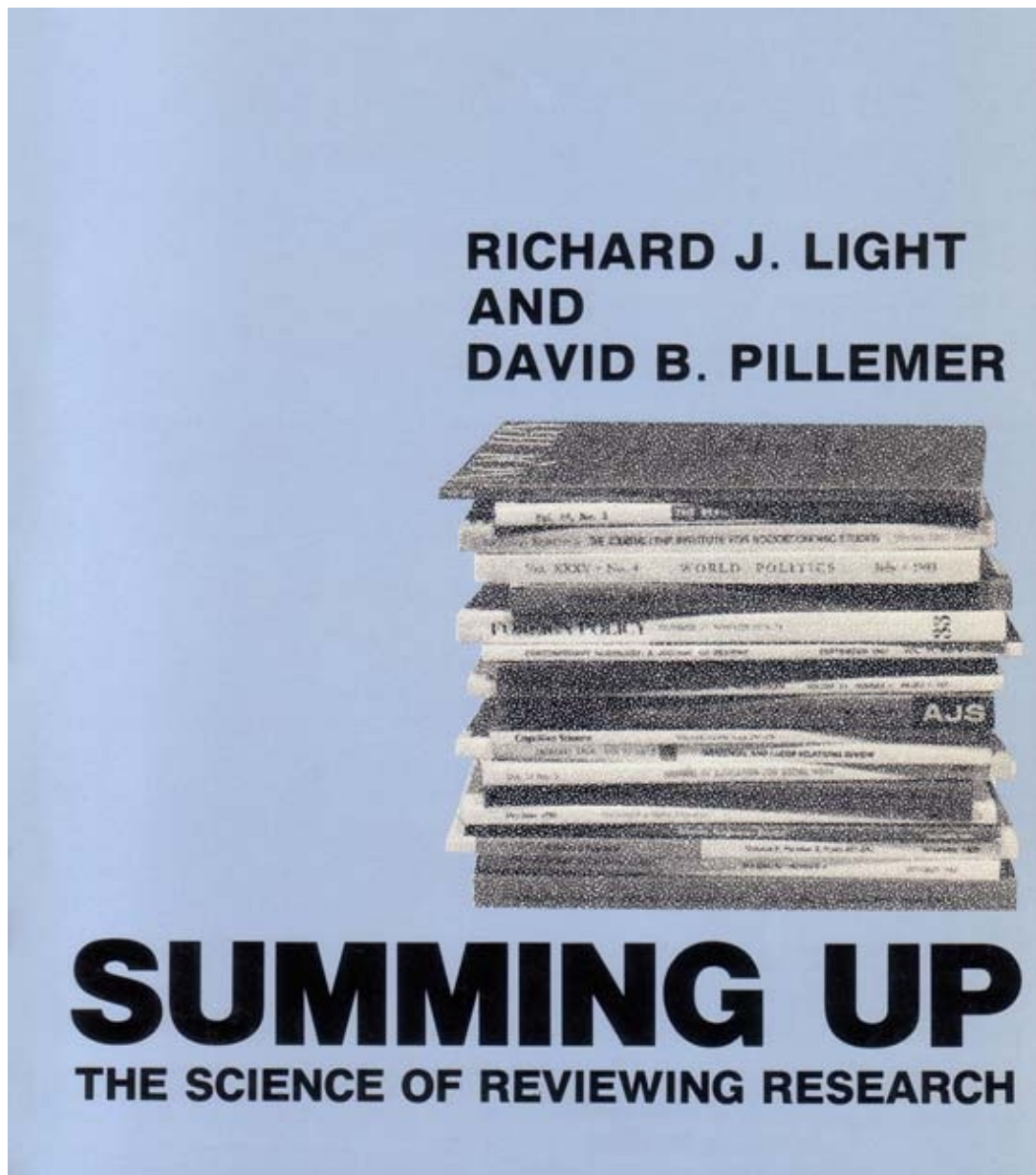
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[Light RJ, Pillemer DB \(1984\)](#). Summing up. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

### Title pages



### Key passages

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#### PREFACE

We decided to write this book because of persistent questions about how to strengthen new research. Each of us has been sought out by others for help in designing new investigations. These requests have come from public agencies and decision-

makers as well as academic colleagues and students. And although the details of the questions change, the broad outlines are extraordinarily similar.

The dialogue begins with a request for help in designing a study. We then ask what has been learned in that particular subject area from earlier studies. After all, new investigations should build upon existing knowledge. The response, nearly always, is that the group of earlier studies is complex and even contradictory. Indeed, the contradictions are an important reason for conducting a new study.

Our questioners seldom consider investing time and resources to synthesize the information that already exists. We wondered why not. This seems to be a sensible first step. Without a clear picture of where things now stand, simply adding one new study to the existing morass is unlikely to be very useful.

Scientists are not the only ones who ask questions about "what research adds up to." Policymakers must make practical decisions based on what is known *now*. In the early 1970s Walter Mondale, then a Senator, in an address to the American Educational Research Association, spoke about research on racial integration in America's public schools: "What I have not learned is what we should do about these problems. I had hoped to find research to support or to conclusively oppose my belief that quality integrated education is the most promising approach. But I have found very little conclusive evidence. For every study, statistical or theoretical, that contains a proposed solution or recommendation, there is always another, equally well documented, challenging the assumptions or conclusions of the first. No one seems to agree with anyone else's approach. But more distressing: no one seems to know what works. As a result, I must confess, I stand with my colleagues confused and often disheartened."

The frustration Mr. Mondale expressed is both widespread and understandable. He wants some firm information, whether it comes down on one side or the other, and he cannot find it. His description of the lack of consistency in scientific findings unfortunately applies not only to research on racial integration but to many other issues as well.

Apart from the formulation of policy, difficulties in reconciling contradictory conclusions from similar studies cripple a fundamental component of the scientific process: the systematic accumulation of knowledge. Mark Twain said in his autobiography, "The thirteenth stroke of a clock is not only false of itself, but casts grave doubts on the credibility of the preceding twelve." This statement captures a critical part of the experience of doing applied research. It seems that for every twelve studies reaching any specific conclusion there is always a thirteenth that disagrees. Mark Twain's solution might well have been to put all thirteen behind him and light out for the Territories. The equivalent of this action in research would be to discard the conflicting evidence and initiate a new study. But such a step would incur three costs: a great deal of information, some potentially valuable, would be thrown away; a decision would be postponed for at least the length of time the new research takes; and, from the point of view of the next reviewer of the literature, the new research would simply be the fourteenth in the set of studies. Even with difficult problems, it is worth trying to combine and reconcile conflicting outcomes.

Clearly, society must improve its efforts to learn from existing findings, to "discover what is known." In this spirit we

began a search for procedures, accessible to nonstatisticians, that would enhance the scientific quality of research summaries. We examined what reviewers currently do when they tackle a group of studies done by different people in different places at different times. Our search led ultimately to the writing of this book. In it we present circumstances under which it makes sense to use various statistical techniques. We suggest new ways of using simple graphical displays to examine patterns among findings. We emphasize conceptual issues throughout, because carefully planned reviews are nearly always stronger and more useful than atheoretical foraging. We also provide strategies for using different kinds of information from many studies. Some studies are primarily numerical; others are narrative or qualitative. Some have large sample sizes; others are tiny. Some have controlled research designs; others do not. Our broad goal is to help readers organize existing evidence in a systematic way, whether a review is motivated by a scientific problem or the need for a policy decision. The book should also help readers examine and evaluate reviews prepared by others.

Our suggestions apply to many fields, including education, health, psychology, and policy sciences, and we include illustrations from each. We have tried to write at a technical level accessible to a broad audience, including academic researchers, policy analysts, and students beginning their careers. We hope this book will help them to strengthen connections between current research and accumulated knowledge from the past.

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