Conflict and Confusion: What Rape Prevention Experts are Telling Women

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An overview of advice given to women in rape prevention literature is presented, identifying three types of advice: (A) Traditional - rape is seen as a woman's problem, which can be met only by having her restrict her activities; (B) Empowered Individual — rape is a woman's problem which can best be addressed by increasing her self-reliance and confidence; (C) Collective Problem — rape is society's problem requiring changes in social structure. An analysis follows of what advice the experts give, what evidence they cite to substantiate their claims, how the information is presented, the extent to which there is agreement among the experts, and how the content of their advice is related to gender and professional background.

The crime of rape affects thousands of females every year in the United States. One survey estimated that at least 46% of all women will be victims of rape or attempted rape in their lifetimes (Russell & Howell, 1983). The need to avoid sexual assault is obviously an enormous burden that is an integral part of a woman's everyday existence. It creeps into her activities and thoughts, conscious and unconscious, both routinely and when the need arises. Because the risk of rape is so ever-present, women seek help in knowing how to avoid and cope with it. They turn to experts who give their advice via books, magazines, journals and informational brochures. Unfortunately, the recommendations women hear are frequently conflicting. The advice offered by one expert is often condemned by another expert. It quickly becomes apparent that rape is a complex issue surrounded by a variety of opinions on how best to defend oneself during an assault and how to prevent one from ever occurring.

In order to understand better the nature of the advice women face, we systematically examined a large sample of publications on rape prevention, asking: What advice do authors give and how is the information presented? What evidence do they cite to substantiate their claims? To what extent do they agree or disagree with each other? Who are the authors? How is the content of their advice related to their personal characteristics such as gender and professional background?

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Method

As part of a larger project on women's judgments about the effectiveness of various rape prevention and self-defense measures (Furby, Fischhoff, & Morgan, 1986a, 1986b), we selected a sample of publications consisting of 50 books, articles, and pamphlets written over the last 15 years by prominent experts in the field. These particular publications were chosen because they represent a broad spectrum of opinions and approaches regarding rape prevention, and because they are among the most widely circulated and readily available to the public. Although these 50 do not exhaust all available publications, the additional books and articles available to us at this writing appeared to offer no novel advice not already represented in this sample. Thus, these 50 publications do provide a reasonably comprehensive view of the advice currently available to women on rape prevention and self-defense.

The publications were read from cover to cover. A detailed listing was made of all prevention and self-defense strategies mentioned and the type of evidence cited (i.e., empirical study, anecdotal, none) was coded for each individual strategy. Each publication was coded for author's professional background and gender; presentation style, general philosophy and assumptions about prevention were also noted.

What Women Are Being Told

The most striking feature of rape prevention and self-defense advice is the lack of agreement among the experts. Although they all share a common goal — stopping sexual assaults against women — as a group they provide few clear messages about what to do. In fact, there are probably only two points of near universal agreement: the importance of good home security as a way to avoid assault (e.g., adequate locks on windows and doors) and the advisability of running away from or leaving dangerous situations as soon as possible. Although some consistency is reassuring, these two recommendations seem like little more than common sense that women should already know without expert help.

Conflicting Advice

Among the more than 400 different prevention and self-defense strategies advocated in the publications reviewed, there are many inconsistencies and disagreements. The clearest examples of these are presented in Table 1. Some of the conflicting recommendations seem to reflect rather basic

Table 1
Examples of Conflicting Advice

	Example A	vs.	Example B
1.	make direct eye contact with strangers or suspicious people (so you look strong and confident and not easily frightened or manipulated) [EI]		do not look strangers in the eye (they might misinterpret your intentions) [T]
2.	women should be mentally and physically strong, more "consciousness raising," more equality [EI & CP]		stop pushing for women's liberation [CP]
3.	fight immediately [EI]		exhaust less violent resources first [T]
4.	scream (so others will hear you and it will scare him off) [EI]		do not scream (he will hurt you more or kill you) [T]
5.	do not be passive (if he is going to hurt/kill you, being passive does not make any difference) [EI]		be passive; go along with him (e.g., sexually) (this will turn him off or at least not antagonize him further) [T]
6.	joke and be sarcastic (show the attacker you are not an easy person to control) [EI]		do not antagonize the attacker; do not put him down or hurt his ego [T]
7.	do not faint or pass-out (so you can stay alert) [EI]		faint (so the attacker cannot control you) [T]
8.	do not cry or appear weak (so you do not look like an easy target) [EI]		cry (appeal to his sympathy) [T]
9.	blow whistle loudly into receiver on obscene telephone calls (to discourage behavior) [EI]		do not blow a whistle into telephone on obscene calls (it will just make him madder, he may retaliate further) [T]
10.	harass rapist, become angry with the audacity of him to treat you in such an animalistic way [EI]		treat rapist as a human being [T]
11.	if you must hitchhike, be aware of cars that change direction to pick you up, more than one man in the car, etc. [EI]		do not hitchhike [T]
12.	meet first time dates in public areas, don't let date make all the arrangements, check them out yourself [EI]		do not go on blind dates [T]
13.	when listing name in phone book use first initials and/ or do not use home address [EI]		have an unlisted telephone number [T]
14.	if babysitting for strangers, check the people out first to see if they are sincere/legitimate [EI]		do not accept babysitting jobs from strangers [T]
15.	lenghten skirts [EI]		do not wear dresses or skirts [T]
16.	carry whistle, but not around the neck [T]		carry whistle around your neck [T]
17.	if car breaks down, put up hood, display white flag on antenna, lock yourself inside and wait for police [T]		if car breaks down, do not wait in car (attacker could look for stranded female motorist - hiding would eliminate this risk) [T]

Note: See text for explanation of the approach each strategy represents as indicated in brackets: [T] Traditional Approach, [EI] Empowered Individual Approach, [CP] Collective Problem Approach.

differences with respect to how aggressive and forceful women should be (e.g., examples 1-10 in Table 1).

In other cases, the conflict between recommended strategies is not quite as blatant but appears in the degree of discretion left to women as to what they should do. This type of confusion appears most typically between statements such as "Do not do behavior A" and "When you do behavior A, be sure and remember to be cautious, confident, alert, etc." (e.g., examples 11-15 in Table 1). In the first instance, an action (behavior A) is categorically condemned, whereas in the second instance it is implicitly condoned. Finally, some instances of disagreement simply reflect differing opinions about the relative risks of certain specific actions (e.g., examples 16 and 17).

In this welter of conflicting recommendations, discerning three basic approaches or patterns of advice may help us understand why there is so much contradiction. Differences in the underlying assumptions of each of these three approaches regarding whose problem rape is and how it can be prevented seem to account for much of the disagreement among authors. The three approaches are: (1) The *Traditional Approach* — rape is seen as a woman's problem, which can only be met by having her restructure and restrict her activities; (2) The *Empowered Individual Approach* — rape is a woman's problem, which can best be addressed by increasing her self-reliance and confidence; (3) The *Collective Problem Approach* — rape is society's problem requiring changes in social structure which would affect all its members.

Traditional. The Traditional Approach places the responsibility for a woman's safety with the woman herself. In order to secure protection, she is advised to alter or restrict her behavior usually at the price of reducing her freedom and mobility and increasing her dependence on others (especially men). This approach not only requires that she control her own actions, but it implies that she must control the actions of the potential offender as well. In the event of an actual assault, she is advised to do things that are generally nonassertive in character.

Traditional Approach advice is generally simple and easy to understand. This type of advice leaves women little room for creative thinking in a rape situation, insisting instead that they rely on specific, packaged steps that can be performed without reliance on analysis or instincts. The clear, concrete form of this advice apparently is intended to meet a woman's need to feel that safety is assured if she takes certain steps.

The Traditional Approach has been criticized by some for being oppressive and disempowering to women because their everyday behavior is so restricted that the quality of their lives is significantly reduced. Even if these strategies were foolproof, critics argue, this loss of freedom is too high a price to pay. For example, stating "good" and "bad" times for women to be out implies that they cannot travel freely. They may be prohibited from taking an evening walk or traveling to a night class or job. Requiring women to depend upon physical defenses (e.g., locked doors) or human protectors (e.g., husbands or boyfriends) denies them the opportunity to develop the skills needed to be strong and self-sufficient. Inasmuch as the strategies cannot be guaranteed to work, such confident advice may give women a false sense of security.

Making a woman responsible for her own self-defense can imply that if she is raped, she must have done something "wrong." If she did not observe the rules, then she is blamed for her own victimization. For example, Cann, Calhoun, and Griffin (1978) found that the more dangerous the setting in which a rape takes place (e.g., a park at night), the more responsibility and blame is placed by others on the woman involved. Thus, in return for the protection that it affords, the Traditional Approach may not only make a woman feel restricted and powerless prior to an attack, but may also set the foundation for her blame and guilt after the attack.

Empowered Individual. While leaving the responsibility with individual women, the Empowered Individual Approach gives them credit for being able to assess and control threatening situations. As a result, this advice replaces the absolute *do's* and *don'ts* of the Traditional Approach with more conditional recommendations. Where Traditional strategies state categorically "Do not go out alone at night," an Empowered Individual strategy might be "When going out alone at night, be alert, be aware of your surroundings and walk confidently." It stresses a woman's right to go anywhere and defend herself aggressively in a potentially dangerous situation. It communicates that women are self-reliant and need not be prisoners in their own homes due to fear of assault. Many of these strategies could be labelled "feminist," in that they recommend assertive actions that do not fit the customary passive/feminine role. An example of this approach would be the recommendation that women learn physical self-defense moves to protect themselves.

The Empowered Individual Approach has been criticized for being unrealistic for the average woman to learn, given the practice and physical strength needed to gain and maintain proficiency. It is seen as misleading by those who worry that it will give women confidence that is not justified. Women who follow its advice risk criticism from others for being "unfeminine." Even though this approach implies women have a right to go anywhere, they may still face the charge from some people of "being in the wrong place" or "not using common sense."

Collective Problem. The Collective Problem Approach holds that reducing the risk of sexual assault is not the responsibility of the individual woman. Rather, rape is a societal problem which can be treated effectively only by social action and community involvement. Among other things, this shift in the locus of responsibility requires that men (as well as women) take the initiative in rape prevention. In so doing, the Collective Problem Approach may also be labelled "feminist," for it radically alters the traditional roles of men and women in preventing rape.

The Collective Problem Approach has been criticized for having such ambitious goals that it is unrealistic to implement. Critics say it is difficult to get a handle on the problem of rape using such a broad social/global perspective.

Because many strategies involve changing social attitudes, the effects are difficult to measure and are not immediate.

The examples of contradictory advice presented in Table 1 seem to reflect, in most cases, differences of approach. Indeed, all but the last two examples consist of such conflict. This suggests that the basis for much of the advice being given to women may be philosophical or ideological rather than empirical. Advice depends more upon an author's beliefs about how women should behave and who should be responsible for preventing rape than on empirical evidence about what is effective (see below). A much less frequent source of disagreement seems to be differences in beliefs about what is risky (e.g., in #17, is it riskier to stay inside one's locked car but be seen, or leave the protection of one's car and hide?). However, the basis for this advice is not empirical either, resting simply on beliefs about relative risk.

Confusing Advice

When looked at closely, many of the specific statements of advice are confusing in and of themselves. For example, "do not dress provocatively when out alone" can be interpreted several ways. Does this mean that it is all right to dress provocatively when out with other people? What does "provocative" mean? Often, the advice is conditional on some feature of the attacker: whether he has a weapon, whether the weapon is a gun or a knife, whether he appears to be hostile, whether he is drunk, on drugs, etc.

When such limiting conditions are included in a strategy, its applicability is narrowed, leaving women without guidance for situations when such conditions are not present. If a woman cannot readily discern whether the limiting conditions hold, the advice is hardly useful. On the other hand, if the strategy is too broad and without conditions, it becomes ineffective because it is unrealistic when applied categorically. There is also an element of doubt in the woman's mind as to specifically when the strategy is to be used. For example, "do not go out alone" may mean she should never be out alone her entire life or it may refer only to nighttime activities in bad neighborhoods.

Another source of confusion is the use of imprecise terms. For example, two common terms, "fighting" and "struggling," are used differently by various authors. Some distinguish between the two, whereas others use the two terms interchangeably. For those who do make a distinction, fighting is usually defined as a calculated, physical, combative move where the woman aims for specific vulnerable parts of the man's body; struggling is defined as grappling, flailing, free swinging strikes at the attacker. Authors who make the distinction generally believe that fighting is by far the more effective self-defense strategy. If this belief is correct, then recommendations that fail to make the distinction can seriously mislead women, because they may think any kind of physical struggle is as good as disciplined, combative moves.

Who is Doing the Telling?

Because this set of 50 publications is not a random sample of all the advice literature, one cannot assume that the authors constitute an unbiased sample of the entire population of advice givers. Nevertheless, since these publications are among the most widely circulated and readily available, it is instructive to take a look at who are the authors. They come from a variety of professional backgrounds including legal services/law enforcement, social service (e.g., rape crisis centers), academia (e.g., professors/researchers), medicine, mental health, and self-employed consulting (including freelance writing). The majority of these advice givers are in social service agencies dealing with sexual assault victims or in academia.

There are more women than men advice givers by a ratio of approximately 4:1. Authors' gender and professional backgrounds are reflected to some extent in the nature of the advice they provide. The Traditional and Empowered Individual approaches are the most frequently mentioned forms of advice

Table 2
Approaches Advocated by Gender of Author(s)

Gender of Author(s)	Traditional	Empowered Individual	Collective Problem	Total Number of Publications
Female	18	21	6	28
Male	5	4	-	7
Mixed (co-authors)	9	6	2	11
Unknown	4	4	-	4

Note: Each publication was coded for the approach(es) that it advocated based on the kinds of strategies included and the strength with which they were recommended. A publication could advocate more than one approach, in which case it was tallied more than once in this table.

and are advocated by a majority of both male and female authors (Table 2). A slightly larger proportion of publications authored or co-authored by males than those authored by females (78% vs. 64%) emphasize the Traditional Approach to rape prevention, one which restricts women's freedom and mobility. In contrast, a somewhat higher proportion of publications authored by females than those authored or co-authored by males (75% vs. 56%) advocate the Empowered Individual Approach, one which acknowledges a woman's strength and her right to fight back and be free from sexual assault.

The Collective Problem Approach is the least mentioned of the three approaches. No publications authored by males alone acknowledge that looking at rape from a societal standpoint (e.g., changing the social structure, laws, males' behavior) could be a viable option to stopping rape, whereas 21% of the publications authored by females advocated this approach.

No clear pattern can be discerned by occupation of author (Table 3). The Traditional and Empowered Individual Approaches are mentioned across all occupations with essentially the same relative frequency; the Collective Problem Approach seems to be mentioned slightly more often by academicians/ researchers than by other occupational groups.

How the Information is Presented

The most common style in these publications is a straightforward, narrative approach with minimal graphics for emphasis. One exception to this pattern is those books which emphasize an Empowered Individual Approach focusing on aggressive, self-defense techniques. These books generally use drawings and photographs to depict visually the physical technique they are describing, to show how it is executed, and to demonstrate situations in which it can be used. The pictures often show the same woman or a similar "type" of woman, young and caucasian, using self-defense moves to break away from the offender's hold. Only two books reviewed show minority women in their pictures: *Self-Defense and Assault Prevention for Girls and Women* (Tegner & McGrath, 1977) has 193 demonstration pictures, 49 (25%) of which show black women and *Looking Forward to Being Attacked* (Bullard, 1977) has 143 demonstration pictures, 6 (4%) of which show black women.

The settings that are frequently depicted in the books with pictures (e.g., park, car lot, street) imply the assailant is a stranger. The attacks generally take place during the day and in places outside of the home. The current statistics on victims and offenders make the representativeness of many of these pictures questionable. They do not reflect the most common situations women face. Women of all ages, sizes, races and levels of attractiveness are attacked. Moreover, a large percentage of rapes are committed by someone known to the victim, rather than by a stranger (United States Department of Justice, 1985). Contrary to these pictures, many assaults take place at night, in a home, and not out in public (United States Department of Justice, 1985; Hageman & Hasting, 1978). Strategies for outdoor safety are surely important, but a disproportionate emphasis on that danger can give women an unrealistic picture of their world. Very few publications address the unique concerns of women who are disabled, senior citizens or minorities.

Although atypical, some of the literature is fear-oriented. For example, the cover of the book *Lady Beware* (Arnold, 1975), whose title sets its tone, shows a close-up of a female's hand, widely stretched open as if she is fear-stricken and screaming out for help. By its very nature, rape evokes fear in women. It seems unwise to accentuate this aspect through titles, graphics and stories which could incapacitate women psychologically while at the same time implying a desperate need for help such as that being offered by the experts.

Although no one can argue that constantly living in fear is healthy, two books, *How to Say No to a Rapist and Survive*

Table 3
Approaches Advocated by Professional Background of Author(s)

Professional Background	Traditional	Empowered Individual	Collective Problem	Total Number of Publications
Academia/Researchers	9	10	5	16
Social Science	8	11	1	12
Legal Service/Law Enforcement	4	3	-	5
Self-Employed	5	4	-	5
Mental Health	3	2	1	4
Mixed Background (co-authors)	3	2	-	4
Unknown	4	3	1	4

Note: Each publication was coded for the approach(es) that it advocated based on the kinds of strategies it included and the strength with which they were recommended. A publication could advocate more than one approach, in which case it was tallied more than once in this table.

(Storaska, 1975) and *Looking Forward to Being Attacked* (Bullard, 1977), have gone to the other extreme and used humor in presenting information to women. Both authors, however, have been criticized for their simplistic and flip approach to such a serious topic. Their books include humorous stories with their Traditional advice in an apparent attempt to make an unpleasant topic more palatable. For example, the chapter titles in Bullard's book, Putting the Old Spark Back in Your Obscene Telephone Calls; Is It Ever Possible for You and Your Burglar to Have a Meaningful Relationship?; Exhibitionists Could Be Nice If They Weren't So Bashful, seem designed to set a humorous tone for the advice ahead. Bullard uses 21 pictures which show women being assaulted in a library, a restaurant, a grocery store or on a tennis court in the daytime during a game. Perhaps chosen for their comic effect, these settings are unrepresentative and hence misleading.

Other attempts to heighten the value of publications can be seen in titles implying that the author has "the" answer to avoiding rape. Titles such as *The Best Defenses Against Rape, 54 Ways to be Safer, What to Do and What Not to Do if You're Attacked, How to Say No to a Rapist and Survive, Rape-How to Avoid It and What To Do About It If You Can't* suggest to readers that the information contained therein is guaranteed to keep them safe. Such confident titles are in marked contrast to the rather meager evidence that most authors are able to bring in support of their claims. Many "fool-proof methods" appear to be based on common sense and personal experience rather than on verifiable research findings. The contradictory nature of the advice found in different publications shows that there is more than one version of common sense.

In most of the publications reviewed here, strategies are presented without an explanation of their intended effects, that is, how they work. Differing beliefs about exactly what works undoubtedly account for some of the contradictory advice and hence confusion experienced by women readers. The purpose of some self-defense strategies, for example, is to avoid antagonizing the assailant; others are designed to make him think outside help is on the way, and still others to physically incapacitate him.

As long as we lack solid empirical evidence about which of these strategies (and others) are most effective in successfully resisting an assault, women must use their own judgment about what will work in a given situation. To do so effectively, they need to know the logic behind a recommended strategy — that is, how it is supposed to work (see Fischhoff, Furby & Morgan, 1986, for one method of systematizing the intended effects of rape prevention strategies). Although many authors may have in mind the reasons they think the strategy works, these are often left unstated, perhaps because they assume all women share their beliefs in this regard.

Do the Experts Really Know the Effectiveness of the Strategies they Recommend?

Advice givers cite various types of evidence to support their claims of a strategy's effectiveness. Some quote other experts, some relate supporting anecdotes, and others cite research studies. By far, the majority of authors make statements about strategy effectiveness without quoting or citing any source.

When authors cite anecdotal evidence, they usually draw upon their own experience. Seldom is there a discussion of how that experience may be biased. Is it any wonder that most literature written by people with law enforcement background and training emphasizes violent, stranger-oriented attacks? These cases are more likely to be reported to police. The rape crisis center/social service experts are more likely to present evidence of women in a variety of situations including date rape and domestic violence. These are the cases they are more likely to see.

Academic researchers naturally tend to emphasize their own research findings and to cite those of other researchers. For the most part, they are cautious in their interpretation of the data and generalizability of advice.

Other authors cite a variety of sources, many of which are nonempirical. These sources include anyone labelled as a "leading authority in the field" (who often remains nameless), police officers, self-defense teachers, other authors of books, and rapists. It is not uncommon to find statements such as "Researchers say that in a majority of cases, if a girl resists in any way, the attacker will turn and run" (Booher, 1981:76), "Most police and self-defense experts say...", "All police departments recommend this..." (Csida & Csida, 1974), without any proof to back up these claims. Even specific statistics are not always supported by documentation. For example, Storaska claims that "35% of rapes are by dates, 35% by acquaintances and relatives, 10% gang rapes, 20% strangers." Similarly he states "20-30% happen in a victim's home," "9 times out of 10, he'll simply take the weapon away from the woman and use it on her," "being antagonistic or violent, he will just turn and run away 50% of the time. But what about the other 50%? That's when he smashes you with his fist, cuts you with a knife, maims you, rapes you, kills you," again with no empirical evidence cited (Storaska, 1975: 44,59,112,131,145,159).

Certain authors appear frequently in citations (e.g., Amir, Bart, Brownmiller, Csida & Csida, Riger, Gordon, McIntyre, Russell, Selkin, Storaska). Some are researchers, while others have a unique viewpoint, style or name familiarity. Name recognition in part is due to the fact that there is relatively little research in the area of rape prevention strategy effectiveness. Therefore, a small set of opinions or research results are repeated frequently, and through this repetition they take on the status of being established fact.

Is Advice Changing Over Time?

Over the period covered by this literature review, the Traditional and Empowered Individual approaches were the most frequently mentioned forms of adice. The Collective Problem Approach did not appear until the late 1970's, in part due to the women's movement. Experts began expressing women's sentiments of anger and resentment at being totally responsible for something that is not just a woman's problem. Stopping rape increasingly was seen as society's responsibility or as men's problem since they are the rapists. This view

argues that women should not be further victimized by being forced to stay home after dark or always walking with a .45 and a doberman.

Unique ideas such as altering the male power advantage, economic equality, eliminating pornography, a curfew on men, early intervention/counseling for young boys who exhibit pre-offender behavior, all broke the Traditional and Empowered Individual mold. Less tangible and often more difficult to implement, the Collective Problem Approach is not frequently mentioned in the literature, in particular not before 1978 (exceptions being Russell, 1974, and Brownmiller, 1975). This relatively new approach challenges society to step back and look at the rape problem in innovative ways.

Summary

There is considerable conflict and confusion in the literature on rape prevention and self-defense, leaving women with a tome of unclear and inconsistent advice.

There are a number of steps necessary to minimize this problem, making the advice more unified and less confusing. These steps involve adhering to evidentiary and professional standards as well as emphasizing approaches which serve to empower women. First, there is a need for more research to establish which strategies are most effective. The little research to date has focused almost exclusively on self-defense during an assault (see Furby & Fischhoff, 1986); there is essentially no empirical work on the effectiveness of measures designed to prevent an attack from ever occurring.

Second, professionals in this field need to impose standards of evidence upon themselves. At the very least, authors should be stating expicitly the basis for their recommendations. In addition, much more weight needs to be given to empirical evidence, sparse as it may be.

Third, experts need to acknowledge and try to overcome their own biases. They need to recognize that they may have experience with a biased sample of rape cases and that it may not be appropriate to generalize what they know to all women. Experts should state clearly their assumptions about rape including who they feel should be responsible for stopping rape and why. This would allow women to understand the assumptions behind particular strategies and to decide if their application would be appropriate to their own set of circumstances.

Fourth, the advice needs to be less fear oriented, trivialized through humor, sensationalized and commercialized. The examples and visual images depicted in the publications also need to be more representative of actual sexual assault cases. This will help reduce women's vulnerability in part caused by misleading or inappropriate information.

Fifth, authors need to assume that women have the ability to assess a potentially dangerous situation and should present strategies in terms of what they are designed to achieve (their intended effect) rather than simply advising a specific action without giving an explanation. No strategy will work in all situations; advice givers should explicate the logic behind strategies they recommend.

Much of the rape prevention and resistance information, whether based on scientific evidence or common sense, may be useful for women. Yet, to maximize effectiveness in reducing rape, women need a much clearer message from advice givers. The experts share the common goal of wanting to stop sexual violence against women. With some improvements in how advice is given, that goal can be more readily realized.

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Appendix A: Literature Reviewed

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