

# Feature Topic at *Organizational Research Methods*: How to Conduct Rigorous and Impactful Literature Reviews?

Organizational Research Methods  
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## Background and Motivation

With an ever-growing body of knowledge in various areas of management including strategic management, organization theory, international business, organizational behavior, and human resource management, there is an increasing need to consolidate, organize, and synthesize the existing knowledge (e.g., Collings & Doh, 2018; Durand, Grant, & Madsen, 2017; Ethiraj, Gambardella, & Helfat, 2017). Review articles play a crucial role in the development of an accumulated body of knowledge and in guiding future research efforts (e.g., Cropanzano, 2009). For example, many doctoral students work with literature reviews to get an initial and broad overview of research areas and current debates. Senior scholars also use literature reviews to shape new debates or shift research directions. They also serve a crucial role in building a body of knowledge that is foundational for evidence-based management that informs policy makers and practitioners (Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau, 2009; Rousseau, Manning, & Denyer, 2008; Rynes & Bartunek, 2017; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). For example, Briner et al. (2009) note that “systematic reviews have become fundamental to evidence-based practice and represent a key methodology for locating, appraising, synthesizing, and reporting ‘best evidence’” (p. 24).

The importance of review studies is reflected by the prevalence of several review outlets such as the *Academy of Management Annals*, *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, and *International Journal of Management Reviews*—all of which are highly influential publications according to the ISI Citations Report. Highly influential are also the *Journal of Management (JOM)* special review issues that are published biannually. Recently, several other journals have adopted *JOM*’s approach and have launched regular review issues. For example, the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Journal of International Business Studies*, and *Journal of World Business* now solicit proposals for a special review issue on an annual basis. In addition to these dedicated journals and special issues for literature reviews, many journals occasionally publish literature reviews, including, among others, *Academy of Management Perspectives*, *International Business Review*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Leadership Quarterly*, and *Strategic Management Journal*.

Yet despite the increasing importance of literature reviews to develop an accumulated body of knowledge and guide future efforts, little methodological advice exists beyond generic and/or editorial guidelines (Cropanzano, 2009; Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Jones & Gatrell, 2014; Short, 2009; Tranfield et al., 2003; Webster & Watson, 2002). The lack of scholarly advice is

problematic for various reasons. First, scholars and editors have repeatedly criticized methodological rigor in review articles. For example, one of the main reasons offered as to why papers were not considered suitable for publication in the *International Journal of Management Reviews (IJMR)* was “methods poorly explained or inappropriate” (Jones & Gatrell, 2014). In fact, many review articles provide little or even no information about the underlying approaches. As Adams, Smart, and Huff (2017) note, “Previously published reviews in [*Management and Organization Studies*] have to a great extent been poor in methodological reporting” (p. 446).

Second, the shortage of advice is in sharp contrast to the general availability and growing knowledge of methods and statistics related to other types of research in management and organizational studies (e.g., Aguinis, Ramani, & Alabduljader, in press). As noted by Denyer and Tranfield (2009), “Compared to the wealth of texts on philosophical approaches to social science research and methods for empirical investigations, there are few instructional texts on literature reviewing” (p. 671). A few recent exceptions exist that exemplify the urgency for methodological advice (e.g., Adams et al., 2017; Gaur & Kumar, 2018). In light of the increasing importance of literature reviews in organization and management research, there is a need to advance our knowledge about the methodological approaches for conducting such research.

## Aims and Scope

Against this background, the purpose of this Feature Topic (FT) is to turn a spotlight on methodological issues and approaches in literature reviews. Indeed, a variety of review studies and methodological approaches exist (e.g., conceptual, narrative, critical, etc.). This variety is also reflected in very different requirements for reviews that different journals have (e.g., *AOM Annals* vs. *IJMR* vs. *JOM* vs. subject-specific journals), which can create confusion and misunderstanding. While the plurality of review methods can be seen as a strength in management and organization research, it also presents particular challenges in terms of what constitutes a high-quality review and how researchers should approach the task of reviewing. These challenges are what motivate this FT.

We seek a variety of contributions that are aimed at providing methodological advice to advance rigor in various types of literature reviews. The contributions may refer to several of the following five broad categories concerning the process of conducting a review study: (1) purposes and review types; (2) data selection; (3) assessment and synthesis; (4) reporting and using the findings; and (5) evaluation criteria, validity, and reliability.

### Topic Area 1: Purposes and Review Types

- What is the role of research question formulation? What are effective motivations for conducting a review study?
- What are useful types of reviews (e.g., pure systematic literature review and meta-analysis vs. complementing/blending systematic literature reviews with other review types—e.g., a systematic literature review with a conceptual review)?
- What are the roles of different types of reviews (e.g., mapping vs. integrative review)?
- When and how can meta-analyses be used to conduct literature reviews? When and how can citation analyses be used to conduct literature reviews? When and how can narrative approaches be used to conduct systematic literature reviews?

## *Topic Area 2: Data Selection*

- What sampling strategies can be used to identify the literature (i.e., the “evidence”)? This refers to various aspects relating to the sample including data sources (e.g., gray literature, journals), scope, timelines, keywords, databases, books, scholarly discipline, etc.
- What are appropriate search strategies, inclusion and exclusion criteria? For example, what are appropriate guidelines for working with gray literature?
- What is the role of exhaustiveness and informational redundancy?
- What kind of (potential) selection biases need to be considered, and how shall these biases be addressed? For example, a sample of works published (only) in journals may be biased because journals tend to publish positive rather than weakly significant or neutral findings.

## *Topic Area 3: Assessment and Synthesis*

- How should the “evidence” (i.e., data in the form of particular articles, unpublished studies, books, etc.) be analyzed?
- Which “traditional” approaches can be used to analyze qualitative and quantitative data? Examples include content analyses, thematic analyses, concept maps, framework analyses, etc.
- Which “alternative” approaches can be used to analyze data? Examples include meta-ethnography, meta-narrative, realist synthesis, meta-analysis, bibliometric analyses, etc.
- When and how can grounded methods and content analyses be used to conduct reviews?
- How should the “evidence” be synthesized? What are appropriate “synthesis strategies”? Exemplary approaches include, among others, critical appraisal, critical interpretive synthesis, descriptive data synthesis, analytical data synthesis, framework analysis, temporal analyses, etc.

## *Topic Area 4: Reporting and Using the Findings*

- How should results reported (e.g., tables, graphs, forest plots, funnel plots)?
- How should various types of reviews inform research and practice?
- How can future research directions be highlighted?
- How can transparency and replicability be facilitated?

## *Topic Area 5: Evaluation Criteria, Validity, and Reliability*

- What are the roles of reliability, generalizability, validity (external and internal validity) and trustworthiness in various types of reviews?
- How should reliability, generalizability, validity, and trustworthiness be ensured?
- How should quality of conduct and quality of reporting be measured and ensured?
- What kind of robustness checks and sensitivity analyses could be done?
- How should reviewers evaluate literature reviews? What criteria need to be fulfilled?

## Submission Process and Timeline for this FT:

- Completed full manuscript submissions for the FT are due by March 1, 2019. Authors may begin submitting manuscripts for the FT on February 1, 2019 (and not before that date). When submitting completed manuscripts, be sure to select from the dropdown menu the FT on **Rigorous and Impactful Literature Reviews**.
- First-round reviews and decision letters returned to authors within three months by June 1, 2019.
- Revised manuscripts due within four months of receiving first-round reviews by October 1, 2019.
- Second-round reviews and decision letters returned to authors within three months by January 1, 2020.
- Final version of manuscripts due within three months of receiving second-round reviews by April 1, 2020.
- The FT would likely appear “in print” in 2021.

## The Guest Editors for this FT are:

- Sven Kunisch, University of St. Gallen (sven.kunisch@unisg.ch)
- Markus Menz, University of Geneva (markus.menz@unige.ch)
- Jean M. Bartunek, Boston College (bartunek@bc.edu)
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- David Denyer, Cranfield School of Management (david.denyer@cranfield.ac.uk)

Questions about possible submissions are welcomed.

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