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The problematizing review:

A counterpoint to Elsbach and Van Knippenberg's argument for integrative reviews

Abstract

In this paper we provide a counterpoint to conventional views on integrative reviews in knowledge development, as exemplified by Elsbach and Van Knippenberg (2020). First, we critique their proposed integrative review by identifying and problematizing several key assumptions underlying it, particularly their idea that the integrative review can simply build on existing studies and lead the way to knowledge. Second, based on this critique, we propose as an alternative the problematizing review, which is based on the following four core principles: the ideal of reflexivity, reading more broadly but selectively, not accumulating but problematizing, and the concept that 'less is more'. In contrast to the integrative review, which regards reviews as a 'building exercise', the problematizing review regards reviews as an 'opening up exercise' that enables researchers to imagine how to rethink existing literature in ways that generate new and 'better' ways of thinking about specific phenomena.

Key words: knowledge development, literature review, problematization, reflexivity

Systematically going through existing studies within a specific area is a vital part of almost all research. Many researchers find ambitious and systematic literature reviews highly beneficial, as they help them to get a better grasp of a specific domain of research. Although literature reviews are also carried out in individual research papers, as a way of establishing an area for contribution (Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997), this is typically done in a selective and rather superficial and simplistic way. This is because summarizing existing work in a few pages encourages arbitrary divisions and rather crude ways of representing sometimes highly complex studies. More thorough, ambitious and comprehensive literature reviews of a research domain in the form of review articles, handbooks and monographs are therefore welcome.

Elsbach and Van Knippenberg (2020) (hereafter E&K) argue that ‘integrative reviews’ are among the most useful vehicles for advancing knowledge and furthering research in a research domain. It is, however, important to keep in mind that there are many different types of literature review and that these have varying purposes (e.g. Post, Sarala, Gattrell and Prescott, 2020; Snyder, 2019). Sometimes they are represented as ‘critical reviews’, ‘theoretical reviews’, ‘systematic reviews’ or ‘semi-systematic’ reviews (Hoon and Baluch, 2019). Most distinctions are not clear-cut, and we believe that some of the defining characteristics of E&K’s take on ‘integrative review’ may in practice be difficult to uphold, such as their idea that the integrative review can simply build on existing studies and point the way to knowledge.

Nevertheless, we regard E&K’s paper as valuable and solid, and find that it contains much of relevance to review authors working within a specific research tradition. Our basic view of knowledge and doing research is, however, rather different from theirs. Instead of seeing reviews as a way to generate ‘representative description[s] of a field’ (E&K, p. 1) and then building on them to further our knowledge of phenomena, we are more interested in reviews that enable researchers to critically interrogate and reimagine existing literature in order to generate new and ‘better’ ways of thinking about specific phenomena. We are therefore more inclined to see a review as an ‘opening up’ rather than a ‘building exercise’, as a catalyst for

starting up new conversations rather than just continuing old ones (Patriotta, 2017). In order to open up and start a new conversation about the review phenomenon, we first identify and problematize some key assumptions and knowledge claims made by E&K and then suggest *the problematizing review* as an alternative to their integrative review for knowledge advancement.

CRITICAL REFLECTION ON THE INTEGRATIVE REVIEW

Our fundamental view of reading and learning from texts is that it is important to consider taken-for-granted – or at least implicit – assumptions and ‘this is the way to do it’ claims (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013b). Although these assumptions and claims may at first sight make sense and appear obvious, they often tend to be constraining and normalizing, particularly if they are not made explicit and unpacked for consideration and discussion. We used this problematization approach in reading E&K’s article and identified several assumptions underpinning their argument for using integrative reviews as a vehicle for knowledge advancement. Here we articulate and critically evaluate seven of their key assumptions:

- treating the review domain as more or less given
- privileging hegemonic ambiguous big concepts
- following the jigsaw-puzzle metaphor
- assuming an accumulation view of knowledge
- advocating a (near) full stock inventory
- assuming author neutrality
- believing that review articles are a good thing

Treating the review domain as more or less given

A critical problem (often sidestepped) in reviews is what defines the domain of a review publication. E&K suggest that ‘an integrative review proffers a clear point of view that defines important research questions that should be (and should not be) examined’, and that ‘integrative

reviews mean a focused approach'. This proposition seems to assume that the review domain is more or less given. However, most of what we study has no clear or absolute boundaries. For example, although established bodies of literature may use labels such as 'institution', 'leadership', 'ethnicity', 'conflict' and 'knowledge management' to describe their domain, these labels may not convey much meaning due to the endless variation in their usage. Literatures using contrasting labels to represent different research domains may appear to mirror how different parts of reality can be conveniently distinguished. However, a closer and more critical look at these literatures may reveal that the same or similar domains are actually represented in very different ways. Moreover, in response to changing academic fashions and publication possibilities, academics often relabel their work to stay 'relevant', which further complicates the task of establishing the content of a review domain.

Despite these labelling ambiguities, review authors often 'solve' the problem of domain boundaries by taking labels too seriously. What is included in a review article is typically based on key words, titles or abstracts. It is therefore a clear risk that what is incorporated in a review is an ambiguous mess, while literatures that could be relevant are excluded. Hence, constructing the review domain and its boundaries in a thoughtful, creative and critical way is a key challenge: not necessarily one best addressed by following the criterion of being clear, focused and relying on the domain labels used by established literature. Instead, we need to consider that domain labels may bear the imprint of rhetorical strategies used by authors who are eager to increase the persuasiveness of their work, which may easily camouflage what their publications are 'really' about.

Privileging hegemonic ambiguous big concepts

The almost exponential expansion of management studies (Corbett, Cornellissen, Delios and Harley, 2014; Engwall and Zagagni, 1998) has made it a very crowded territory, leading to a stronger need for researchers to position themselves clearly in a particular knowledge domain

and show how it differs from others. In this regard, the integrative reviews of specific research domains proposed by E&K can be seen as highly valuable, giving researchers a clearer bearing in a crowded academic field. However, as we have already noted, established and appealing domain concepts, such as ‘institution’, ‘knowledge’, ‘strategy’, ‘sensemaking’, ‘leadership’, ‘diversity’, ‘power’ and ‘resistance’, are easily overused and filled with a variety of ambiguous meanings. Alvesson and Blom (2020) refer to such concepts as hegemonic ambiguous big concepts (hembigs). A hembig is a scientific concept characterized by its broad scope and ambiguous meanings, which at the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, through its dominance crowds out other less fashionable concepts or prevents the development of a more precise terminology.

Over time these big concepts tend to exercise a hegemonic influence on researchers because it is difficult to escape them. Review publications, special issue editors and researchers are often eager to build up large and impressive ‘knowledge brands’ (Mehrpooya and Willmott, 2018), and are therefore sometimes not especially interested in clear, focused, and well-delimited differences among studies. Instead, they promote pluralism, which tends to camouflage extremely diverse work under the same hembig concept. For example, many advocates of ‘institution’ regard variation as an indicator of healthy pluralism and see its different versions as offering the promise of theory integration. However, ‘for those who have attempted to scratch beneath the surface of this supposed promise, one experience would have to be very common: considerable confusion’ (Lok, 2020, p. ref to come). The same applies to ‘sensemaking’, which is commonly portrayed as something uniform and clear by its advocates, when what it actually represents is highly ambiguous and vague (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; 2020).

The problem of hembig concepts is often exacerbated by the integrative review, which is guided by an expectation of sameness and the imperative of not excluding any texts from the ‘article catch’, but rather integrating everything into a coherent whole. Sameness is therefore

privileged over difference. A counter-assumption is that the relationship between the hembig concept and published texts referring to it is, at best, highly ambiguous and that any sorting device taking hembig concepts too seriously may risk generating misleading reviews and building on elements that fit very badly together.

Following the jigsaw-puzzle metaphor

Another assumption guiding E&K and many review authors is that existing studies within a research domain can be viewed as pieces in a large jigsaw puzzle (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2018). As E&K argue, ‘if we see management research as focused on solving puzzles (i.e., answering research questions in the field), individual studies provide pieces of the puzzle rather than solve the puzzle’ (p. 3). In this view, the overall point of the integrative review is to piece together a clearer image of the domain in question and, based on this, to identify what pieces are missing and what pieces need to be shifted around to make the puzzle more complete. In other words, if you get everything sorted out and placed in the right way, you can demonstrate how the picture should look: for example, provide answers to the research question and deliver robust knowledge results.

However, individual studies are not necessarily best seen as supplementing each other and forming pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. Even if the ambition is to produce integration, all the ambiguities, frictions, conflicting perspectives and results within a domain need to be considered. An alternative metaphor could be to see the research domain more as a ‘jungle’ or a ‘maze’, where navigation is difficult and attempting to turn it into a ‘French baroque garden’ is not only a hopeless task but also highly problematic as an ideal (Alvesson and Sandberg, forthcoming).

Assuming an accumulation view of knowledge

Closely related to the jigsaw-puzzle view is the strongly held assumption that knowledge production is cumulative, which underpins E&K's integrative review and many other types of review article. The accumulation norm suggests that advancement of scientific knowledge occurs through an ongoing accumulation of studies within a research domain (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013a, p. 134). Thus E&K argue that 'we build knowledge through programs of research in which studies help advance knowledge by building on previous work and setting the stage for future research' (p. 3). The wealth of studies combined may offer strong and reliable parts of a large knowledge-building project.

Although the accumulation norm overlaps with the jigsaw-puzzle view, it is not the same. You may work with a jigsaw puzzle while being sceptical to accumulation, and you can believe in the latter without adapting the puzzle metaphor. However, combinations of the two are common: working with a complicated puzzle and being suspicious about the value of the pieces mean an overwhelmingly complicated project.

Since Kuhn (1970) there has been much critique and questioning of the accumulation ideal (Abbott, 2006), particularly from the paradigm and multi-paradigm literature (e.g. Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Deetz, 1996; Tsoukas and Knudsen, 2004). Most, if not all, research builds on, and is constrained by, paradigmatic and other assumptions. Sometimes critique shows that many research studies lack real value or are so dependent on their paradigmatic grounding that they cannot be compared with other work, making accumulation very difficult or impossible, hence the notion of incommensurability (Jackson and Carter, 1991). An alternative to the accumulation norm is to point at divergence and problematic assumptions, and to emphasize productive dissensus. This has consequences for the integrative part of a systematic review and suggests that what studies indicate on an aggregated level may not be the best way forward for research.

Advocating a (near) full stock inventory

Related to the accumulation view is the assumption that review articles should aim to cover very broad areas. An ideal seems to be to include all articles in leading journals and/or frequently cited papers over a long period of time. E&K refer approvingly to the recommendation to ‘systematically trace much (or maybe even all) of the literature on a selected topic back to its roots (Callahan, 2010)’ (p.3).

The (near) full stock inventory ideal exacerbates the previously mentioned problems of superficiality and domain specification in two central ways. One issue is that studies labelled in the same way, but actually addressing different phenomena, are lumped together, producing a pseudo-unity. The other problem is that studies which are actually referring to the same phenomenon, but are labelled differently from the key label for the review, are not targeted for inclusion. The first problem is over-inclusion; the other is exclusion.

Consequently, the (near) full stock inventory ideal means in practice an overreliance on the ‘right’ label, which may prevent the review author identifying studies that are highly relevant to the specific phenomenon being addressed, but that are not labelled as such. Using a full stock inventory approach in reviews means, then, that knowledge development can easily become built less upon core insights than upon adding to literatures labelled in specific ways, which further reinforces the already problematic box research prevalent within management and organization studies (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014).

In addition, the (near) full stock inventory ideal means (almost per definition) that little attention is given to carefully scrutinize the credibility and value of existing studies, and therefore risk overlooking the huge and often problematic variability in the credibility of existing studies included in the review. Although in theory we should have faith in the credibility of existing studies (particularly those published in our top-tier journals), as many have noted, it varies quite significantly among studies. For example, in regard to the replication crisis within social sciences, Freese and Peterson (2017) observe that even studies aiming to

mimic other studies are not necessarily successful in doing so, indicating common problems of reliability. Many critical review articles also show that in research areas where several hundred studies have been conducted, the studies have fundamental weaknesses and offer little of real value. A case in point is the leadership field. According to a growing number of commentators, many, if not most, subareas of leadership studies suffer from questionable assumptions, design and theoretical reasoning (e.g. Alvesson and Einola, 2019; Hunter, Bedell-Avers and Mumford, 2007; Fischer, 2018). Van Knippenberg and Sitkin (2013, p. 45), for example, argue that ‘the vast majority of transformational leadership studies have relied on a measurement approach for which there is overwhelming evidence of its invalidity’. Hence, the varied credibility of studies in the leadership field (as well as studies in other research domains) suggests that there is a need to more carefully assess the identified studies before including them in a review and using them as robust points of departure for knowledge advancement, something which tend to be overlooked by advocating a (near) full stock inventory.

Assuming author neutrality

An additional assumption worth considering is author neutrality. For E&K the integrative review comes with ‘an attitude’, but is based on neutral description: ‘at the basis of integrative reviews lie descriptive reviews – representative summaries of the state of the science’ (p. 11), and ‘we also argue that the insights or perspectives offered *arise from the review*, rather than *guide the review*’ (p. 4, italics added).

The idea that the reviewed literature should ‘show the way’ is, however, problematic. The reviewer is key in conducting the review and he or she cannot be completely neutral, as indicated by the very diverse conclusions of review authors in the leadership field, cited above. One may question the relationship between the review author doing something active – using judgement and creativity – and relying on the literature reviewed to show the way. It is here important to ask questions such as what is paid attention to in the review, what language is

being used, and what is excluded from or downplayed in the review? Similarly, do review authors take findings at face value or do they carefully scrutinize and evaluate the findings? Are specific research groups or orientations being privileged in the review? For example, are the research texts reviewed published only or mainly in US journals, which is far from a neutral approach, even though it can be legitimated through references to citation scores. Such citation scores are not always the best quality indicator, but rather an outcome of what is in fashion, power relations, US domination and the institutionalization of ‘must’ references. Hence, efforts by review authors to appear neutral easily reinforce conservatism and thereby cement an existing field or domain rather than opening it up for problematization and novel ideas.

Believing that review articles are a good thing

A final assumption inherent in E&K’s article and held by many other review authors is that review articles are something good by nature. Arguably, review articles offer several benefits. A review gives readers an overview, it facilitates learning from existing studies, it reduces the risk of missing much within the core field. Occasionally, some additional knowledge can be produced through comparisons and synergy effects. As stated previously, some reviews, even though not framed as ‘critical’, point at fundamental shortcomings within the areas covered (e.g. Hughes et al., 2018; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013).

However, review articles are not always beneficial but can instead be problematic, making this type of work into a mixed blessing. Many review articles tend to strengthen box thinking by overemphasizing integration and using seemingly robust but problematic sorting devices. Review articles also function as an ordering mechanism of the research community, in that people may feel instructed to master what is reviewed, not necessarily to consider other literatures or ways of framing the field. You may, for example, relate to the ‘leadership literature’, while disregarding studies on managerial work, power and hierarchies. In the worst case, a problematic ‘over-ordering’ is produced by review authors often acting as champions of

their subtribes in the overcrowded place of academia, where mass education has been followed by mass research and the resulting struggle for attention, status and power (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014). Here there is a temptation to highlight order and the strength of a specific movement, and neglect the fact that labels are sometimes mere vehicles and rhetorical resources for people to gather around and use (Astley, 1985).

Hence, one could argue against that, rather than being a good thing, the integrative review article is potentially harmful. Here we can point to the value of books, handbooks and other collections of papers, allowing for more complex, nuanced and qualified review treatment of broad themes; Burrell and Morgan (1979) and Morgan (1997) are inspiring examples. A good scholar reads and writes books. The more influential social science scholars have achieved their success primarily through books. Unfortunately, the regime of the journal article and its often mainstreaming effects is dominating management studies, and this may be reinforced by the popularity of review articles, often only or mainly covering articles in frequently cited journals.

Summing up

Triggered by Elsbach and Van Knippenberg's thoughtful and well-informed article, we have pointed to a number of basic issues that may provide food for thought when thinking about review articles. We suggest that careful attention is called for by themes of labelling and ordering research domains, knowledge accumulation ideals, vacuum cleaning large sets of literatures, reliance on oversimplifying sorting and ordering signs, author neutrality and the possible privileging of integration at the expense of recognizing variation. We do not want to overemphasize criticisms of review articles, but we do think that any way of seeking to develop knowledge through them requires critical reflection on their potential shortcomings.

AN ALTERNATIVE: THE PROBLEMATIZING REVIEW

Inherent in the reflections above are ideas for an alternative way of thinking about the review publication. Based on those inclinations, in this section, we propose and elaborate the *problematizing* review as an alternative to the integrative review. Instead of integrating existing studies using specific labels, such as ‘innovation’, ‘trust’, ‘identity’ and ‘leadership’, the primary aim of the problematizing review is to re-evaluate existing understandings of phenomena, with a particular view to challenging and reimagining our current ways of thinking about them (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013b). The problematizing review is therefore based on different assumptions and ideals from Elsbach and Van Knippenberg’s paper. Key features in a problematizing review can, however, be seen as either a negation or a supplement to conventional ideas of the review article.

Significant for us is the use of broad and careful judgement: thinking through problems with ordering and, thus, normalizing ways of doing research; critically assessing the quality of studies; and avoiding covering too much within a narrow terrain and instead considering broader knowledge domains. A central ambition is to generate re-conceptualizations of existing thinking that trigger new ideas and theories. As we have already presented some of the reasons for our alternative approach in the discussion of E&K – in particular, that labels are unreliable indicators rather than robust signposts to a domain; that the problem of inclusion/exclusion needs to be taken seriously; and that other publication forms are more open to the development of new ideas than the journal review article – we will be fairly brief in elaborating them here. Specifically, our problematizing review is based on four core principles: the ideal of reflexivity, reading more broadly but selectively, not accumulating but problematizing, and the concept of ‘less is more’.

The ideal of reflexivity

A core principle underpinning the problematizing review is reflexivity. There are many views on this matter (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018; Steier, 1991). Reflexivity, as we define it, means actively and systematically trying to avoid taking conventions for granted and simply reproducing and reinforcing them. It considers alternative ways of working and writing than seeing a specific publication form (e.g. journal articles) or the review domain as given. It also points to the central role of the researcher and the research group, and emphasizes the need to mobilize a broad spectrum of intellectual resources for understanding the forces that guide research behind the researcher's back, such as paradigms and fashions. It downplays or even rejects ideals such as rationality, procedure, transparency, and being trustful of conventions. Reflexivity typically calls for the researcher to read a limited number of texts carefully, to challenge his or her interpretations by considering alternative perspectives and sources of inspiration, to work with doubt and recognize intuition, and to aim for insightfulness rather than rigour or pseudo-rigour (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2018).

In a problematizing review, the author is guided by a constant consideration and occasional questioning of assumptions, perspectives and vocabularies in order to come up with, test and possibly suggest alternative ideas and ways of thinking about a phenomenon or domain. Awareness of the paradigm-bound nature of research is central here. For example, the overwhelming majority of the leadership literature proceeds from 'the assumption that the employees sampled innately need or desire leadership' (Hunter et al., 2007, p. 436). However, one could see this need, desire or interest in leadership among employees as a false assumption, or as a more open issue, and even suggest that some people do not see themselves as followers and want to be spared leadership at work (Blom and Alvesson, 2014). Assumptions about the leader-driven nature of relations between seniors and juniors can also be highlighted and questioned by drawing attention to 'the wholly imbalanced view in the literature of the nature

of agency, where leader agency is seen as close to absolute while others are mainly passive and responsive' (Tourish, 2014, p. 83).

The reflexive principle in the problematizing review, then, means a systematic and ambitious effort not just to follow and build on a dominant logic – or the preferred vocabulary and line of reasoning of the researcher her/himself – but to confront this with alternative points of departure, vocabularies and modes of interpretation (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013b; Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018).

Reading more broadly but selectively

A second principle central to the problematizing review is to read broadly but selectively. As we discussed earlier, review authors often aim to cover a large amount of work (perhaps too much) within a specific domain – sometimes everything that has appeared in leading journals with the right keywords during a specific time period. This approach addresses far too many studies for them to be treated in a thoughtful way, and often leads to an emphasis that is too narrow. Crossan and Apaydin (2009) ambitiously covered 525 studies in their systematic review and also aimed to 'fully understand all definitional nuances, associated constructs and related models' (p. 1155), which for us seem to be a complicated and time-consuming undertaking.

The principle of reading broadly but selectively in the problematizing review rejects the full store inventory approach, and its neglect of the highly varied, and often problematic, credibility of existing studies. It suggests a more limited and careful set of readings, but also a combination of readings where the researcher is not 'going native' by reading too much in a limited field, possibly with strong conventions. Reading according to the problematization approach may be based on, for example, a three-level approach. At the first level, the review author focuses on some core and representative readings within the targeted (sub)domain. The author could, for example, focus on, say, ten recognized core studies in the domain targeted,

and then ten to twenty other texts, perhaps being picked at random out of a sample. Some people in the domain (informally or through a panel arrangement) could then be asked to recommend additional studies outside this sample and, based on this, ten or so more studies could be added which are perceived as valuable to the collection of texts being carefully read or re-read. Our key point is to have a revealing but manageable sample – allowing for critical scrutiny and insight generation rather than aiming for vacuum cleaning.

At the second level, the author shifts focus and considers some broader texts, addressing, say, five to ten significant texts, either in the immediate neighbourhood of the targeted domain or more broadly relevant for the perspectivation of the review domain. Reading outside what is conventionally viewed as the targeted domain partly aims to recognize and counteract the problems of the arbitrariness of a domain for review. Sometimes, neighbouring domains may be seen as distinct or the same, based on different preferences. Transformational and charismatic leadership are, for example, seen by various authors as the same (Van Knippenberg and Sitkin, 2013), as similar or overlapping (Sashkin, 2004), as siblings (Jackson and Parry, 2008), or as quite different (Wilson, 2013; Yukl, 1999). Even a reviewer treating them as distinct could consider some key works within the literature not labelled exactly as the review indicates. For example, many versions of organizational culture may be highly relevant for understanding issues more fashionably addressed under labels like ‘organizational identity’ and ‘institutional theory’ (Alvesson and Robertson, 2016; Hatch and Zilber, 2011).

At the third level, the author could consider some (re)readings of classic or important social science studies with a broader, and possibly more indirect, bearing on the research domain targeted for review. Reading more indirectly relevant work can encourage a broader perspective on the review domain, and work as a counterpoint to engaging only with sorting out details in framings of phenomena within a specific research box, such as strategy-as-practice, careers, institutional complexity, followership or whatever the review is focusing on. A few thought-provoking and different (meta)perspective (re)readings of ‘peripherally

relevant' literatures could then inspire reflexivity and critical reflection (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018). One could, for example, look at a list of the twenty to thirty most cited social science (or management theory) writings and choose a few that appear broadly relevant to, but not a precise fit for, one's specific review domain. The important thing is to support a more intellectual and scholarly, less paradigm-bound and specialized, way of relating to a specific set of studies, providing an antidote for taking too much for granted when reading often similar types of study. This could support a healthy distance and use of the imagination, while reducing the inclination to 'go native' in the research domain within which the review author has perhaps been working for a long time.

To summarize, the point of reading broadly but selectively and with a considered portfolio is to encourage review authors to be less subtribal and assumption-blind in their orientations, and to reduce the risk of box thinking and taking the existing research domain as given.

Not accumulating but problematizing

A third principle underlying the problematizing review is to question rather than trying to identify missing pieces in the accumulating domain jigsaw puzzle. Most, if not all, review publications include some elements of critical as well as creative thinking. E&K (p. 7) write that 'critical analysis involves careful examination and critique of the extant literature, with an eye toward identifying themes, patterns, relationships, and gaps in understanding. Creative synthesis, by contrast, involves integrating existing frameworks with insights gained from the critical analysis to formulate a new perspective regarding the topic.'

These critical elements are, however, often rather moderate and sometimes barely seen beneath the more salient ideals of being neutral, ordering and packaging large chunks of studies, and letting them, without much questioning, show the way to new knowledge. The conventional 'critical analysis' is often surface focused, with the eye attending to what is visible rather than to the underlying assumptions and taken-for-granted ideas of the established literature. These

‘unpostulated and unlabeled’ assumptions (Gouldner, 1970: 29) are, of course, much harder to detect, as the review author typically shares a worldview with the literature being addressed.

Rather than undertaking a surface reading of a large volume of available studies, a deep reading of the foundational texts, and of a moderate number of representative texts of a field, enables the author to better identify, articulate and challenge problematic, taken-for-granted assumptions in a specific domain (Davis, 1971). The idea is, then, to read sufficiently to come up with potentially new insights for novel theorizing. A problematizing methodology for such reading could include the following principles: (1) identifying a domain of literature; (2) identifying and articulating assumptions underlying this domain; (3) evaluating them and focusing on more problematic or limiting elements; (4) developing an alternative assumption ground with the potential to become the start of a novel theoretical contribution; (5) considering it in relation to its audience (what is seen as new, credible and interesting); and (6) evaluating the alternative assumption ground (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013b). The last of these is important in order to assess the possibility of having a new, counterintuitive conversation with others in the field that will inspire new ways of thinking on a subject (Patriotta, 2017).

As the reader may have noted, we have partly followed this problematization methodology in our review of E&K’s paper, identifying and challenging the authors’ assumptions. It is important to consider two interrelated issues when identifying a domain of literature for problematization: the actual domain targeted and the specific texts chosen for deep readings and re-readings. Identifying or constructing a domain of literature provides a way in to picking some texts, but careful reading of these may inspire a revision of the literature domain that will be the final target of the research question. As we have said, conventional, label-guided domain specifications may not be productive, due to the hembig problem and the general difficulties of using labels as reliable indicators of phenomena for targeting.

Hence, the problematization principle suggests a less strict focus on the analytics of the surface material offered by the available literature, and its claims about ‘themes, patterns,

relationships, and gaps in understanding’, and a stronger focus on its paradigmatic assumptions and ways of constructing reality. As this shift in focus can be quite difficult to achieve, it calls for the mobilization of a wealth of resources, including time for ‘deeper’ thinking and support from intellectual sources other than those on the explicit subject matter. Reflexivity is key here: what may be problematic and constraining in my and, in particular, my research community’s way of thinking about this domain? Are there alternatives that I (we) don’t consider? Can I (we) read literature or talk with people offering an alternative view, providing support in understanding the possible arbitrariness of the way we tend to do research, and produce a specific type of reasoning and results? Reading too much in a subfield can easily lock the researcher into the research box, making him or her strong on conventionality but weak on imagination and creativity. Some effort to undertake ‘out-boxing’ is therefore needed to liberate ourselves from conventions and institutionalized ‘truths’. This typically calls for a certain distancing and perhaps alienation from one’s research community and the in-boxing it tends to promote (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2014).

Less is more

A final principle guiding the problematizing review is ‘less is more’. It emphasizes fewer readings of a large number of studies, and more concentration on coming up with new and unexpected insights. As indicated previously, the vacuum-cleaning ideal is problematic. Just because there is a wealth of studies does not necessarily mean that they represent a wealth of valuable knowledge. Texts in a field often say more or less the same thing, and an extensive reading of many articles may lead to a focus on minor variations and distinctions while overlooking more basic elements. As we pointed out in regard to leadership studies, many studies do not have very much to say as well as vary greatly in value and credibility and should perhaps therefore be neglected or at least downplayed rather than be the topic of a careful review. In the problematizing review, texts cannot be quickly browsed through (except to check

that they are broadly similar and adhere to the same conventions); results cannot be taken more or less as given, and compared as if they represented simple and robust building blocks in the manufacture of new knowledge. Instead, more hermeneutical readings form a central part of the problematizing review, involving critical scrutiny of how phenomena are constructed and their underlying assumptions, together with searches for deeper meanings (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2018).

In sum, the problematizing review proposed here does not aim to be distinctly critical or to debunk a knowledge area. Instead, its overall aim is to combine critical and constructive considerations of a research domain, to open it up for serious consideration and reconstruction in ways that help us think ‘better’ and differently about the world and ourselves. In other words, a good review (which may include more or less significant elements of problematizing) must help us move beyond both established scientific and practical commonsense understandings of phenomena. Ideally, it should, at least in some ways and when motivated, re-signify (Reed, 2011) or break with (Bourdieu, Chamboredon and Passeron, 1991) established truth and/or expectations (Suppe, 1979) rather than merely reinforcing and cementing already established research boxes. This may call for the use of other forms of publication than the standardized review article, allowing for more exploratory and emergent types of writing and publishing. We have tried to exemplify a non-conventional tone in this article. Box-breaking or transcending work also calls for care and self-critique, so the review is fair to texts used as triggers for new thinking. The idea with the problematizing review is, of course, not to dismiss everything that has been done or to problematize for its own sake. It is also important to highlight high-quality studies and ideas. Thus, the problematizing review may in some ways reinforce conventional knowledge development; in others, support more or less radical rethinking.

FINAL REMARKS

In this paper we have discussed some of the dominant assumptions underlying the integrative review proposed by E&K, and indicated a set of alternative principles under the label of the problematizing review. Our purpose has not been to argue for the inherent superiority of the proposed alternative in comparison to the integrative review, although we agree with many commentators on the need for more interesting and imaginative studies (e.g. Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013a; Clark and Wright, 2009; Courpasson, 2013; Davis, 2015; George, 2014; Patriotta, 2017; Starbuck, 2006). There are, as we see it, far too many conventional studies basically saying more or less the same thing. Although we regard the integrative review suggested by E&K as being of high value, it is important to point to the shortcomings of any conceptualization and recipe for review publications – as well as literature reviews more generally in empirical articles.

In the spirit of reflexivity, we acknowledge that the problematizing review we have proposed may be criticized for several disadvantages and problems, such as for underutilizing a whole set of studies in a knowledge area targeted for a review publication; for focusing on underlying assumptions that are hard to detect; for allowing too much discretion to the researcher doing the review work; and for being too demanding. We also acknowledge that there may be a problem if more energy goes into challenging assumptions than into working out and refining or testing well-founded and productive ideas (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2013b). The pursuit of novelty and everyone wanting to develop their own theory is not unproblematic. These critiques are valid, but they do not prevent the problematizing review from being useful and relevant, at least in order to expand the imaginary of how we think about, and work with, review publications. There is broad agreement that, as management studies moves towards a stage of maturity, it ‘is increasingly in need of conversation starters, new ways of envisioning model readers, and authors who are able to develop more imaginative text-building strategies’ (Patriotta, 2017, p. 758).

While dominant understandings of reviews use images like the review author as construction worker or puzzle solver, we are more interested in their role as an artist, a detective, an innovator or even an anthropologist, supporting the innovative part of research (Alvesson and Sandberg, forthcoming). These alternative metaphors highlight elements such as creativity in terms of different perspectives, representations, hunting for hidden clues in a set of texts, searching for possibilities of reinventing the targeted domain or saying something truly novel, or looking at the tribe of academic researchers in a specific field and asking ‘what do these people think they are doing’? They suggest ways of doing something that is more creative in terms of offering interpretations and suggesting new ideas based on both positive and critical readings of the existing literature. In some cases, this may be seen as a modified version of the integrative review; in other cases, the outcome may be better referred to as a problematizing review. Of course, there are versions in between the extremes and different possible emphases on the integrative and the problematizing in a review publication.

Here we need to consider problems of fragmentation and the need to sum up positive lessons from a larger set of studies. Crossan and Apaydin (2009) advocate the systematic review to counteract the fragmentation of a field and facilitate its consolidation. This is important, but one could also make the case that conventional reviews often cement box-thinking and reproduce taken-for-granted assumptions and conventions. As a way to challenge compartmentalized thinking, there may be a need for studies that show more clearly the variation and fragmentation in a field, and based on this, open up the possibility of new framings and ways of structuring and disordering knowledge fields (or jungles). Challenges may occasionally be better than more of the same kind of reviews, reproducing core elements in established thinking.

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