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Writing impactful review articles

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ABSTRACT Literature reviews lie at the core of the theorizing process: they provide a reference point for mapping a field of study and form the baseline for developing theoretical contributions. The two Point-Counterpoint articles presented here seek to reflect on the purpose of literature reviews, and offer alternative strategies for writing impactful review articles.

Keywords: reviews, writing, theorizing, integration, problematization.

INTRODUCTION

Literature reviews lie at the core of the theorizing process: they provide a reference point for representing a field of study and form the baseline for developing theoretical contributions (Post et al., 2020). In this regard, review articles play an important role in promoting collective reflections about the state of the art in a given topic domain and stimulating further debates around it. In recent years, review articles have progressively acquired a prominent status in the research panorama, and have assumed the characteristics of a well-established genre with its own rules and conventions.

The term ‘review’ has multiple connotations. Its original meaning refers to ‘an inspection of military forces’. Over time, it has acquired the meaning of ‘examining again’, ‘looking back’ and ‘considering or discussing critically’. These definitions point to the semantic richness and multiple intentions of the act of reviewing: subjecting a body of work to rigorous scrutiny; examining by looking back at what has been done; and critically reflecting on existing knowledge with a view to studying, learning, evaluating, or even modifying it. The manifold connotations of reviewing have the potential to create differing interpretations with regard to what writing a review article means and how the task of reviewing should be approached.

The two Point-Counterpoint pieces presented in this issue examine the challenges of reviewing a body of work, and offer alternative strategies for writing impactful review articles: the ‘integrative’ review and the ‘problematizing’ review. In their Point, Elsbach and van Knippenberg (2020) argue for the value of integrative reviews in which authors create new knowledge by

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mapping, critically analyzing and synthesizing an existing body of research in a topic domain.

From an integrative perspective, writing a review article is a process of ordering whereby authors revisit a body of knowledge that is usually fragmented, dispersed, contradictory or saturated with the purpose of both consolidating current understandings and creating new ones. This view portrays a research domain as a jigsaw puzzle in which the review author acts as a problem solver engaged in piecing together a coherent set of insights from a plurality of individual studies. The purpose of review articles is to reform and reconfigure this puzzle so as to provide a holistic picture of the state of the art in a given area of research. This is accomplished by singling out and clarifying key dimensions of a phenomenon, exploring patterns, highlighting similarities and differences, connecting previously unconnected works and streams of literatures, developing categories that amalgamate multiple concepts, and drawing boundaries.

Integrative reviews follow a temporal logic aimed at recording previous work, preserving and updating (Torraco, 2016). As a genre, they can be compared to a documentary: they are intended to document the state of knowledge in a given field, primarily for the purpose of fixing existing understandings or maintaining a record of what we know. Review authors leverage this temporary fix to develop a platform for future research. For this reason, integrative reviews typically comprise two components: 'taking stock' and 'moving forward', where the former (the ordering and accumulation of existing knowledge) is a pre-condition and a context for the latter (the elaboration of a future research agenda).

The Counterpoint by Alvesson and Sandberg (2020) recognizes the value of integrative reviews but also raises some critical concerns that lead to the formulation of an alternative approach to writing review articles. The authors articulate their position in two steps. They first critique the integrative review approach by identifying and problematizing several of the key assumptions that underlie it, particularly the idea that the integrative review can simply build on existing studies and lead the way to knowledge. Subsequently, based on this critique, they propose the problematizing review as an alternative approach that emphasizes the systematic questioning of the core assumptions underlying a particular body of literature. The problematizing review is a distinct type that is based on its own set of 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 approach sees reviews as an 'opening-up exercise' that enables researchers to re-

imagine existing literature in ways that generate new and 'better' ways of thinking about specific phenomena.

In line with its central assumptions, the problematizing approach focuses on a subset of core readings rather than considering the entire body of work produced within a particular area; it condemns author neutrality and privileges authors' critical voices; it challenges the cumulative way of building knowledge and proposes an 'opening-up' approach. Overall, problematizing presupposes a conception of knowledge as a contested terrain in which advancement is achieved through subjecting existing knowledge to scrutiny and challenge. The essence of this approach lies in the critical questioning of core assumptions, which provides opportunities for developing new knowledge. The purpose here is to re-evaluate rather than consolidate current understandings of phenomena, to challenge dominant ways of thinking rather than reconcile them and to start new conversations rather than synthesize existing ones.

The two approaches express a fundamental tension between two sets of expectations about theorizing (see Locke and Golden-Biddle, 1997): one supposes that reviewing organizes a knowledge space with the purpose of making it more accessible (integrative reviews), and the other that reviewing subverts that space with the purpose of extending the field of possibilities (problematizing reviews). Integrative reviews generate construct clarity and orderly knowledge spaces. They place boundaries around an existing area of research with the purpose of offering an organized display of what is available and building a platform for further research. Problematizing reviews question the status quo in order to reconfigure and reenergize a given body of literature. They deliberately disrupt boundaries so as to invite ongoing reconstructions of a field of study. Taken together, the two approaches form part of an ongoing effort to capitalize on existing knowledge while breaking up its linear evolution to free up new spaces for contribution.

THEORIZING THROUGH REVIEW ARTICLES

Review articles engage with a body of prior work with the purpose of developing new theory. More specifically, as Post et al. (2020: 352) have pointed out, they can a) help other researchers understand the research topic and discern important, under-examined areas, which allows for the development of novel and interesting research questions and empirical studies in subsequent research; b) connect research findings from disparate sources in original ways so that a new perspective or phenomenon emerges; and c) bridge fragmented areas of research by developing links between established, but previously unconnected, theoretical perspectives.

The logic underpinning these points is that review articles advance knowledge by developing conversations that others can use (Huff, 1999). By engaging with a collection of texts, they connect a community of scholars – who are at the same time authors, readers and interpreters – around a set of ideas. This connection can be characterized as an iterative and reciprocal process of ‘production’ and ‘consumption’ (de Certeau, 1984). Scholars read (consume) others’ work and subsequently use it as a basis for writing their own articles and producing new knowledge. The production-consumption cycle occurs by referencing the work of others. In the same way as dictionaries explain the meaning of words by using other words (see Eco, 2011), so the interpretation of ideas can only occur by referencing, and connecting to, other ideas. By reading others’ work, scholars develop understandings that become the backdrop for producing new meanings. This is why by offering competent readings and representations of a whole body of literature, review articles constitute such a valuable resource for academic work.

From this perspective, writing review articles is essentially about articulating the link between consumption and production, between what we read and how we represent the ideas in our readings through the filter of our own understandings. Hence, reviewing a body of work involves processes of both sensemaking and sensegiving. Authors of review articles initially act as readers engaged in making sense of a complex and often fragmented body of knowledge, and they then convey their understandings to an academic audience. Furthermore, as sensegivers, review authors engage in the ‘politics of meaning’ (Slavich et al, 2020): they emphasize particular meanings over others and direct our attention towards specific aspects of a particular body of work. Integration and problematization are alternative strategies for reading a text and communicating understandings. Integrative reviews organize knowledge spaces by synthesizing existing research. They provide comprehensive representations of a given body of knowledge so that subsequent research can build on and add to that knowledge. Problematizing reviews operate through the deconstruction of dominant assumptions within more selected and more critical knowledge spaces. They aim to question the current state of the art, and thereby create new opportunities for contribution.

In order to increase knowledge and understanding, scholars must say something new while connecting what they say to what has already been said (Becker, 2007). Review articles generate theory through processes of appraisal that insert a personal perspective into the work of others. Appraisal implies unearthing, or even modifying, originally intended meanings; it is a characterization and implicit manipulation of others’ work. Both integration and problematization

are valid and effective forms of appraisal, but they differ in terms of strategies for representing a topic domain. On the one hand, integrative reviews privilege inclusiveness and accuracy when reporting the state of a conversation. The authors' voices remain in the background in favor of letting the text speak; sensemaking prevails over sensegiving; insights *arise from the review*, rather than *guiding the review*. On the other hand, problematizing reviews require more assertive authorship. Authors insert their messages, their views and their accent into the conversation under review; they note their differences in relation to the dominant text. In both cases, review articles are anything but passive. Writing review articles consists of practices – selecting, organizing and assessing a body of literature – that transform an existing text, with its plurality of voices and speaking positions, into a new text without individual owners, one that belongs to no one but is nonetheless accessible to all.

A body of literature is a reservoir of meanings in search of interpretation. Developing theory through review articles requires ongoing interactions of reading and writing, sensemaking and sensegiving, consumption and production. These interactions produce provisional and competent manipulations of a body of fragmented writings in such a way as to make them more comprehensible or infuse them with new meanings. From this perspective, reviewing is a way of re-inventing and re-writing a collection of texts in a given domain for the purpose of making them usable by other readers. To paraphrase de Certeau, we might say that a review article makes a body of literature habitable, like a rented apartment (p. xxi). It borrows concepts and theories from the existing literature with the purpose of transforming other authors' published work into a knowledge space that becomes publicly available. The difference between the two approaches presented here lies in how radical a transformation they engender: integrative reviews privilege progress through ordering and synthesis of the existent, while problematizing ones focus on challenging existing knowledge configurations with the purpose of promoting change.

A discussion on the form of review articles is important because it makes us aware of the range of conventions underpinning our theorizing efforts (Patriotta, 2017). It is significant that this debate should be taking place now because it signals that review articles might be at a turning point. On the one hand, review articles have become increasingly important because they render a service to the community. Furthermore, they attract a large number of citations, thus boosting the reputations of both their authors and the journals in which they are published. Indeed, review articles have arguably emerged as the most impactful form of academic writing. On the other hand, the proliferation of literature reviews indicates points of saturation of particular areas of

research, which potentially undermines theoretical advancement. Reviewing a body of work is a form of reproduction, albeit to varying extents: it is subject to the conventions of the genre and it can be self-referential – in the literal sense that it produces a proliferation of references that potentially defy the purpose of ordering and giving sense. These critical tensions highlight the need for both consolidating and opening up not only fields, but also forms of writing. At JMS, we want to promote new ways of theorizing through thought-provoking review articles. In this regard, whether taken individually or in tandem, integrative and problematizing reviews constitute effective ‘text-building strategies’ (Patriotta, 2017) for advancing knowledge in a field of study.

Michel de Certeau (1984: 174) wrote that readers – and, by extension, academics – are travelers; they move across lands that belong to someone else like nomads poaching their way across territories marked by others. From this standpoint, review articles design trajectories, provide roadmaps that guide academic readers through convoluted paths and set the direction of travel. It is our hope that this Point-Counterpoint will stimulate authors to conceive ambitious and inspiring review articles that advance management knowledge and research.

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