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### The delivery of bad news

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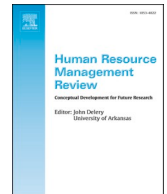
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## The delivery of bad news: An integrative review and path forward

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## ABSTRACT

Managing the delivery of bad news is a crucial component of effective human resource management. However, the diversity of contexts in which this phenomenon has been studied has made it difficult to develop a consolidated theoretical and practical understanding of bad news delivery. Using an interdisciplinary integrative review ( $N = 685$ ), we critically analyze how bad news delivery has been conceptualized as well as what interdisciplinary theoretical insights and practical guidance can be offered. Beyond identifying key challenges in the extant literature, we also provide a path forward by showcasing key opportunities, including how conceptualizing bad news delivery as a dialectic process that unfolds over time can further enhance theoretical insights and practical guidance for effectively managing bad news delivery in the workplace.

“No one loves the messenger who brings bad news.” – Sophocles (Antigone)

## 1. Introduction

Effectively delivering bad news is crucial within the workplace (e.g., Bies, 2013). Indeed, the delivery of bad news is an integral component of many HRM processes, including providing negative performance feedback (e.g., Larson, 1986; Motro & Ellis, 2017), denying promotions (e.g., Caza, Caza, & Lind, 2011; Vough & Caza, 2017), and announcing employee dismissals (e.g., Folger & Skarlicki, 1998; Skarlicki, Barclay, & Pugh, 2008). Moreover, the popular press has been awash with examples reflecting bad news delivery recently. For example, consider recent instances of mass layoffs in the IT sector (e.g., Isaac, 2023; Mickle, 2023; Siddiqui & Merill, 2022), many of which were executed poorly via a two-minute video conference. They had devastating effects on employee morale while also creating reputational damage for managers and organizations (e.g., Kelly, 2022; Peck, 2020). Besides these recent public cases, the scholarly literature has identified pervasive and serious consequences of failing to deliver bad news effectively across various HRM processes. This includes negative implications for senders (e.g., detracting from perceptions of leaders' legitimacy; Ibarra & Babulescu, 2010), recipients (e.g., eliciting negative emotions and/or behaviors during negative feedback; Alam & Latham, 2020), interpersonal relationships (e.g., damaging relations through performance appraisals; Harris, 1994), and organizations (e.g., diminishing financial performance; Ahn, Bonsall, & van Buskirk, 2019; Jahn & Brühl, 2019).

Delivering bad news is involved in many HRM processes (see Table 1 for an overview). This includes negative performance

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feedback (e.g., Cannon & Witherspoon, 2005; Fedor, Davis, Maslyn, & Mathieson, 2001; Silverman, Pogson, & Cober, 2005), layoff notifications (e.g., Guild, 2002; Hopkins & Hopkins, 1999; Patient & Skarlicki, 2010), reporting organizational performance (e.g., Ahn et al., 2019; Baker & Hernandez, 2017), and corporate social responsibility initiatives (e.g., Jahn & Brühl, 2019; Lin, 2020). While the context in which bad news is delivered is wide-ranging in the management literature, there has been a strong tendency to focus on how senders (e.g., managers) deliver bad news to recipients (e.g., employees, external stakeholders), providing a very narrow view of the phenomenon. By contrast, other disciplines (e.g., communication studies, medicine, psychology) have examined bad news delivery from different angles and with disparate emphases (e.g., focus on the recipient, providing evidence-based practical guidance), suggesting that there are more insights available than the management literature has so far focused on. In general, these different emphases across disciplines have resulted in independent silos of research that refer to diverse conceptualizations of bad news, different actors of the delivery of bad news, and recommendations on how to deliver bad news effectively.

By conducting an integrative and interdisciplinary review of 685 articles on bad news delivery, we consolidate these diverse findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of bad news delivery that integrates insights related to the sender and recipient perspectives, and how these parties may influence each other during the delivery of bad news. These theoretical insights are also imperative for providing effective practical guidance and policy recommendations (see Antonakis, 2017), which is especially important considering the negative consequences of failing to deliver bad news effectively and maintaining effective HRM processes. Our overall objective is to provide a critical analysis of the current state of bad news research by discussing overarching trends and limitations in the literature and suggesting opportunities for future research. In sum, this can deepen our theoretical understanding, facilitate theoretical advances, and enrich practical guidance for HRM.

We structured our interdisciplinary, integrative review around the key research questions that we outline below and that aim at making three key contributions.

### 1.1. How has the delivery of bad news been conceptualized?

A multiplicity of definitions has emerged as the delivery of bad news has been studied with a diversity of approaches and across contexts. This has created conceptual ambiguity and atheoretical approaches to studying the delivery of bad news. To ensure that scholars are thinking about and studying the same phenomenon, it is critical to establish conceptual clarity (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, & Podsakoff, 2016; Yaniv, 2011). To develop a clear conceptual understanding, it is important to first examine how the delivery of bad news has been conceptualized to identify the core features of the delivery of bad news. Given that “conceptual definition and theory formulation go hand in hand as necessary steps in one unified process of scientific research” (DiRenzo, 1966, p. vi) and conceptual definitions are the “essential building blocks of theory” (Podsakoff et al., 2016, p. 165), we also explore what theories have been used in extant research. By examining conceptual challenges and theorizing in tandem, we identify opportunities to further deepen our conceptual and theoretical understanding, enabling a more integrated approach to studying the delivery of bad news while ensuring a common framework for practitioners to effectively delivering bad news at work. Building on this foundation, we propose that the delivery of bad news should be conceptualized as a dialectic process that is dynamically and socially constructed through the interplay between (at least) two parties. In doing so, we provide the conceptual foundation to develop a shared understanding that can advance the literature towards a state of maturity (see Antonakis, 2017; Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007; Pfeffer, 1993).

**Table 1**  
Summary of bad news delivery contexts within the HRM literature.

Topics/Streams of Research	N (%) Among HRM Literature	Bad News Content	Delivery Process	Direction of Communication	Evidence-Based Stepwise Guidance Found
Individual performance	48 (52.75%)	negative performance feedback (formal/informal), performance appraisals, criticism	manager tells employee to increase their performance	manager to employee	no
Layoff/ Downsizing	16 (17.58%)	employee (forthcoming) dismissal, uncertainty for layoff victims after downsizing	either verbal or written communication to employees	manager/ management to employee	Yes, SPIKES protocol <sup>a</sup>
Organizational performance	9 (9.89%)	e.g., financial forecast, decrease of earnings, firm liquidation, quarterly earnings announcements, the stock price	either verbal or written communication to employees or external stakeholders	management to internal and/or external	no
CSR	3 (3.30%)	e.g., adverse info on CSR activities	either verbal or written communication to employees or external stakeholders	management to internal and/or external	no
Organizational crisis	2 (2.20%)	e.g., fraud, corruption, scandal	either verbal or written communication to internal/ external stakeholders	management to internal and/or external	no
Other	13 (14.29%)	death notification, failure reporting, supervision	Coroner/police informing about violent death, employee reporting project issue, supervision encounter	various	no

<sup>a</sup> protocol by Baile et al. (2000) applied by Richter et al. (2016).

### 1.2. What trends emerged in bad news delivery research?

While there is a voluminous literature related to the delivery of bad news, it is spread throughout a diversity of disciplines. We consolidate key interdisciplinary insights into a critical appraisal of recent scholarly trends related to several key issues, such as the omitted notion that bad news delivery is a process, the lack of research that investigates the interplay between actors, and the focus on challenges and direct reports rather than positive dynamics and the broader social context. By pointing out limitations in the voluminous state of the art of interdisciplinary research on bad news delivery, we identify key challenges and opportunities that will assist scholars in identifying gaps in the literature, thereby amplifying knowledge creation and offering important implications for policy and practice. Following Antonakis (2017) notion that a key purpose of research is to uncover the nature of a phenomenon with the goal of facilitating practical guidance and policy recommendations, we also provide a research agenda for enhancing theoretical and practical insights into the delivery of bad news, including deepening our understanding of the dynamic interplay between multiple actors as well as how the delivery of bad news can be effectively managed within organizations. Doing so will address the recent call in the HRM literature to account for interpersonal dynamics of individuals influencing each other (e.g., Leroy, Segers, van Dierendonck, & den Hartog, 2018) and broader calls within the management literature to focus on responsible management practices (i.e., producing insights and evidence-based guidance for topics that are relevant to business; see Tsui, 2021).

### 1.3. How can bad news be delivered effectively?

Although it is recognized that treating recipients of bad news with interpersonal sensitivity is important (Mast, Jonas, Cronauer, & Darioly, 2012; Molinsky & Margolis, 2005), practical, evidence-based guidance within the HRM literature on how to deliver bad news effectively is scattered and the effectiveness of strategies remains unclear. Consequently, many individuals hesitate to deliver bad news (e.g., Brown, Kulik, & Lim, 2016; Larson, 1989) and/or struggle to deliver bad news, often relying on their own experiences and intuition or attempting to deliver bad news as efficiently as possible (e.g., Garg, Buckman, & Kason, 1997). However, these strategies are unlikely to serve as best-practice examples for creating positive experiences and mitigating detrimental outcomes. To overcome this limitation, the management literature has pointed toward the need to use training to reduce avoidance and enhance the fair treatment of employees while delivering bad news (e.g., Skarlicki & Latham, 1996). Other disciplines have, however, offered practical, evidence-based protocols on how to deliver bad news step-by-step to maintain the sender's legitimacy and enhance the recipient's acceptance of the news (e.g., Baile et al., 2000; Daly et al., 2001; McFarlane, Riggins, & Smith, 2008; Narayanan, Bista, & Koshy, 2010; Tan, Pang, & Kang, 2019). Translating these protocols into the HRM context may be effective by equipping managers with hands-on guidance on navigating the challenges of delivering bad news, thereby curtailing negative consequences. For example, Richter, König, Koppermann, and Schilling (2016), in a rare example, adapted the "SPIKES" protocol (see Baile et al., 2000) to the HRM process of layoff notifications and showed that using this protocol enhances procedural fairness perceptions, while it also decreases stress for managers sending, and employees receiving the news.

Thus, following our third research question, we examine the availability of communication strategies in the interdisciplinary literature. By identifying and integrating insights into the HRM context, we answer calls to enhance practical, evidence-based guidance (see Holstead & Robinson, 2020; Torres, 2020; Waldman, Ramirez, House, & Puranam, 2001). Our goal is to identify gaps and opportunities for developing practical, evidence-based guidance that can be leveraged by those who must deliver bad news as part of their work routine. This is critical because the availability of practical guidance is influential in enhancing effective delivery (e.g., Du Plessis & van Niekerk, 2017), limiting negative consequences for employees, managers, and organizations.

We conclude by offering a research agenda that provides conceptual clarity, encourages a shift towards more explicitly examining the interplay between actors of bad news delivery, recognizes the multiple senders and levels of analysis, maps the process of creating meaning and positive outcomes, and promotes the development of evidence-based practical guidance that serve as guideposts for individuals navigating bad news delivery at work.

## 2. Overview of the review process

To conduct our review, we began with a scoping phase to identify relevant keywords and disciplines linked to bad news (Hiebl, 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). More precisely, we examined references in peer-reviewed articles known by the authors, research databases, and search engines (e.g., EBSCO, PSYINDEX, Web of Science, Google Scholar). Results of the scoping phase were used to design the search strategy and select keywords for the systematic search phase. To provide methodological transparency (Aguinis, Ramani, & Alabduljader, 2018; Post, Sarala, Gatrell, & Prescott, 2020), we followed PRISMA guidelines<sup>1</sup> (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, & Altman, 2009) in reporting our steps in the systematic literature selection (see Fig. 1). The study protocol and results are available on the Open Science Framework ([https://osf.io/dfsj/?view\\_only=271bf1a92ecc42409a7a6b6ab3e78f5d](https://osf.io/dfsj/?view_only=271bf1a92ecc42409a7a6b6ab3e78f5d)).

<sup>1</sup> PRISMA, short for Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses, refers to a catalog of evidence-based best practice recommendations on what to report in systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses. This includes for example specifying and presenting all databases and search strategies, reporting inclusion and exclusion criteria or how the data was collected. In addition, PRISMA offers a standardized flow diagram for authors when illustrating their inclusion/exclusion process of papers. The provided guidelines aim at enhancing and unifying the reporting of authors across scientific disciplines while providing a common standard for readers when appraising the review process. For more information on PRISMA, see <https://prisma-statement.org/>.

We searched for publications in Business Source Premier, PSYINDEX, PsycINFO, PsycARTICLES, MEDLINE, ERIC, JSTOR, and Web of Science databases to account for the distribution across disciplines. Based on recommendations from Harari, Parola, Hartwell, and Riegelman (2020), we also included Google Scholar to enhance the yield of relevant interdisciplinary studies and examined the first 300 results because this provides the highest probability of deriving scholarly insights (see Haddaway, Collins, Coughlin, & Kirk, 2015). Based on the results of the scoping phase and to address the diverse set of research streams investigating bad news and synonyms available, we adopted an inclusive approach when reviewing and integrating the bad news literature with the following keywords: bad news, difficult news, sad news, serious news, adverse news, difficult conversat\*, layoff notification, job eliminat\*, negative performance feedback, and feedback inflation. Additionally, these keywords were combined (i.e., AND deliver\* OR communicat\*) to narrow the search. The first search for studies yielded 67,174 articles after removing duplicates.

### 2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

To be included in the review, articles had to be published in a peer-reviewed journal (and written in English). This was to ensure that we focused on evidence-based knowledge, which is important given that the delivery of bad news can be an idiomatic expression that is frequently discussed in outlets that are not peer-reviewed (e.g., journalistic papers, blogs, or tweets). We restricted the reviewed studies to those focusing on a delivery situation in which the information being transmitted is perceived as “bad” a priori but did not restrict the field of study.<sup>2</sup> Finally, we did not apply a specific time frame in which the papers needed to be published to ensure that scholarly insights from earlier years were included. Applying those criteria and removing duplicates, the final sample consisted of 685 articles.

### 2.2. Coding procedure

We developed a codebook to systematically code articles for general information about publication (e.g., publication journal, title, year of publication, and discipline), perspectives (e.g., sender, recipient, both perspectives), roles (e.g., who is sending and who is receiving the news, accounting for power differentials and communication directions), variables that were assessed, bad news content (e.g., negative performance feedback, layoff, unfavorable health conditions), and the conceptual definition of bad news to investigate the different features within and across the different streams of research and check their applicability in the HRM domain.

### 2.3. General findings of the review

The review indicates that papers were published between 1971 and March 2022, with most published between 2010 and 2022 ( $n = 448$ ). In addition, the delivery of bad news has been investigated across a range of disciplines, mainly outside of the management literature. As summarized in Table 2, most studies (62.48%) were published in medicine investigating how medical staff can deliver bad news while enhancing patient satisfaction. Only 13.72% of papers originate from management where research has been concentrated on performance management or feedback (e.g., Alam & Latham, 2020; DeNisi & Murphy, 2017; Meinecke, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Kauffeld, 2017; Steffens et al., 2018) and fairness-related issues (e.g., Caza et al., 2011; Hillebrandt, Saldanha, Brady, & Barclay, 2021; Holt, Bobocel, & Chen, 2021; Varty, Barclay, & Brady, 2021). Interestingly, across disciplines, most studies have focused on the sender perspective, with only 22.77% examining the recipients.

There have also been different emphases across domains. For example, medicine has concentrated on developing practical guidance (e.g., comparing the effectiveness of stepwise protocols; Ahmady, Sabounchi, Mirmohammadsadeghi, & Rezaei, 2014; Azu, Jean, Piotrowski, & O’Hea, 2007; Bumb, Keefe, Miller, & Overcash, 2017), psychology has emphasized individuals’ reactions when sending or receiving bad news (e.g., Fong, Patall, Vasquez, & Stautberg, 2019; Ilies, Judge, & Wagner, 2010; Niemann, Wisse, Rus, van Yperen, & Sassenberg, 2014; Waung & Jones, 2005), and communication studies (5.26%) has focused on what may prompt senders to withhold or positively distort bad news (e.g., Dibble et al., 2015; Dibble & Sharkey, 2017; Rosen & Tesser, 1972). These differences highlight the diversity of bad news research and point out that consolidating interdisciplinary findings may provide more comprehensive insights to be leveraged in HRM.

We critically analyze the state of research on bad news delivery across disciplines, review the different conceptualizations of the phenomenon, examine common patterns in applied research endeavors, and conduct a thorough analysis of practical guidance on how to deliver bad news effectively. By structuring our review around critical appraisals and overarching issues followed by discussing

<sup>2</sup> The delivery of bad news can take various forms of workplace interactions which may differ in their features, (e.g., doctor-patient, counselor-student, manager-employee). However, what all of these interactions have in common is that they involve individuals delivering bad news as part of their work routine. Therefore, we reviewed an interdisciplinary field of research that may offer insights that can be valuable to enhancing practical guidance in HRM related bad news delivery contexts which is scarce. For example, while doctors may not always have an ongoing relationship with patients (e.g., after the delivery of bad news), this may mirror managers who must conduct a layoff, thereby ending the relationship with the employee, or those that must deliver bad news to employees who are not their direct reports. Compared to doctors, managing the delivery of bad news is even more important for managers who need to maintain a functioning relationship with their followers even after denying a promotion or providing negative performance appraisals. We acknowledge that the consequences of bad news delivery might vary based on the kind of news that is delivered (i.e., illness, bankruptcy). However, we believe that reviewing and integrating insights from other disciplines to HRM is essential in directing research and practical efforts toward creating novel pathways and will assist in effectively delivering bad news at work.

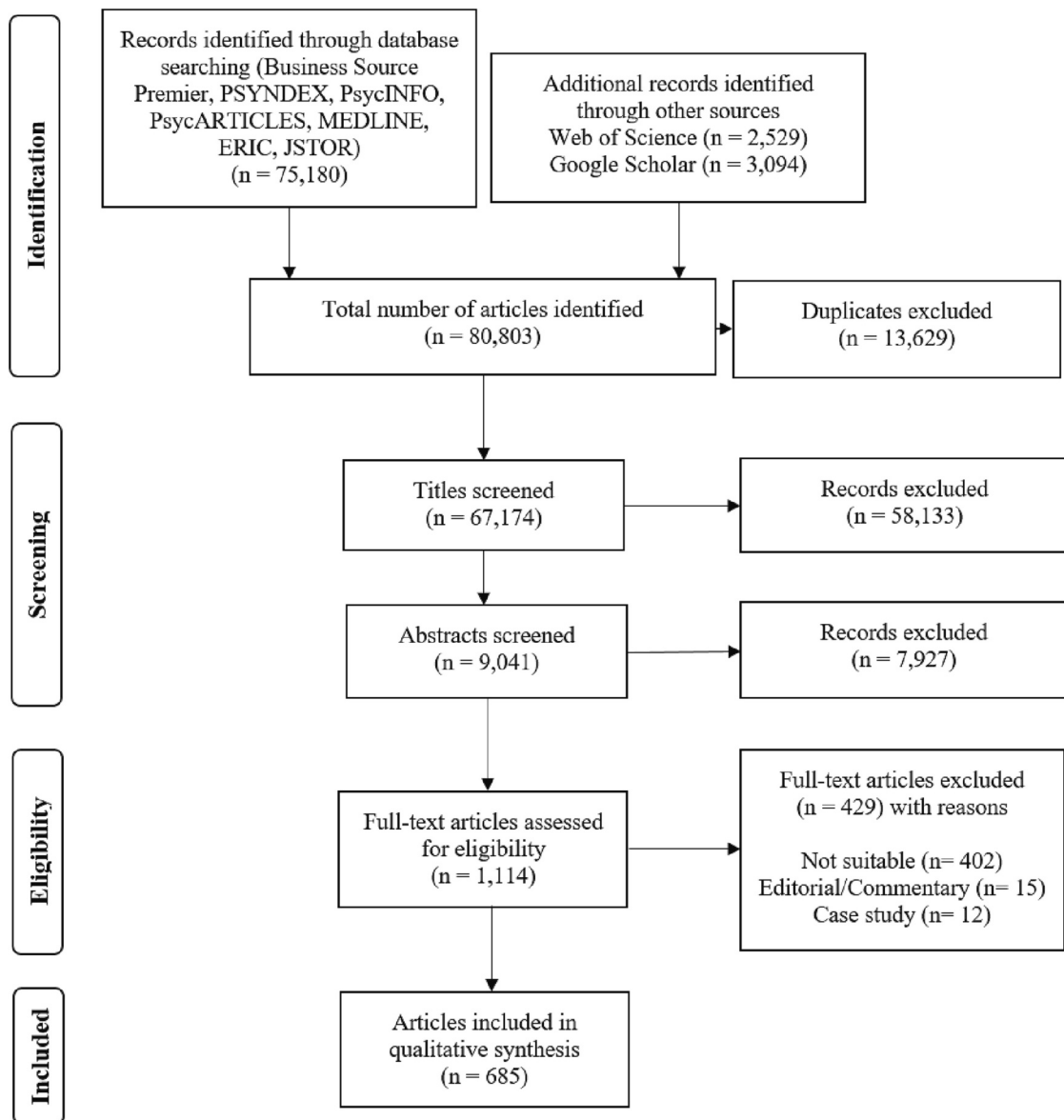


Fig. 1. PRISMA flowchart of the review process.

opportunities in a path forward section, we aim to assist the field in reaching a state of maturity that will create conceptual clarity, spark novel research endeavors, and enhance practical guidance.

### 3. A critical analysis of the conceptualizations of bad news delivery

We identified several differences in how the field has conceptualized the delivery of bad news. Interestingly, the varying use of conceptualizations emerges due to the multiple actors (e.g., sender, recipient) and contexts (e.g., performance feedback, terminal illness) in which the bad news is delivered. In addition, we identified that only a small number of papers applied theory to embed their research endeavor within a theoretical framework, which is likely a result of conceptual ambiguity. In the following, we discuss two issues related to the conceptualizations of bad news delivery, which impeded conceptual clarity.

#### 3.1. Issue #1: Manifold definitions create conceptual ambiguity

Our review highlights the lack of consensus regarding the conceptualization of bad news. Most of the reviewed articles (81%) did not provide a conceptual definition. Of those that provided a conceptual definition, 24% provided more than one definition (i.e.,

**Table 2**  
Frequencies of bad news delivery research by sender and recipient focus across disciplines.

Discipline	Papers Included (%)	Focus <sup>a</sup>		
		Sender n (%)	Recipient n (%)	Both n (%)
Business & Management	94 (13.72)	77 (82.80)	14 (15.05)	2 (2.15)
Communication	36 (5.26)	32 (88.89)	3 (8.33)	1 (2.78)
Education	2 (0.29)	2 (100.00)	–	–
Medicine	428 (62.48)	275 (64.25)	104 (24.30)	49 (11.45)
Psychology	99 (14.45)	62 (62.63)	30 (30.30)	7 (7.07)
Sociology	3 (0.44)	3 (100.00)	–	–
Technology	17 (2.48)	13 (76.47)	2 (11.76)	2 (11.76)
Veterinary	1 (0.15)	1 (100.00)	–	–
other	5 (0.73)	3 (60.00)	2 (40.00)	–
∑	685 (100.00)	468 (67.16)	155 (23.86)	61 (8.99)

<sup>a</sup> Percentage sums up row-wise and might not reflect the numbers of papers included due to theory papers not focusing on either sender/recipient/both.

provided a “flavor” of the construct rather than a specific definition), and 58% used a variant of [Buckman \(1984\)](#). This definition, from medicine, focuses on the recipient and defines the delivery of bad news as comprising “any news that drastically and negatively alters the patient's view of her or his future” (p. 1597). Within the management literature, [Bies \(2013\)](#) defines bad news by similarly focusing on the recipient. However, our review points out that scholars so far have focused on the manager perspective. For example, within the context of negative performance feedback, [Kluger and DeNisi \(1996\)](#) defined the delivery of bad news as “actions taken by (an) external agent(s) to provide information regarding some aspect(s) of one's task performance” (p. 255). By contrast, other definitions highlight the importance of recognizing the exchange or discussion between the parties (e.g., [Covello, 1992](#); [Varner, 2008](#)).

Overall, four major types of definitions emerged (see [Table 3](#)). First, the delivery of bad news has been defined in terms of recipients' outcomes. For example, most definitions focus on negative implications for recipients, including deficits related to cognition (e.g., lack of hope), emotions (e.g., threat to emotional well-being), and/or behaviors (e.g., fewer behavioral options; [Bor, Miller, Goldman, & Scher, 1993](#); [Ptacek & Eberhard, 1996](#)). However, focusing on the reactions of the recipient limits the phenomenon's scope

**Table 3**  
Sample of extant conceptualizations.

Source	Definition	Number of Papers Citing Source
<a href="#">Buckman (1984, p. 1597)</a>	“By ‘bad news’ I mean any information likely to alter drastically a patient's view of his or her future (whether at the time of diagnosis or when facing the failure of curative intention).”	78
<a href="#">Ptacek and Eberhard (1996, p. 496)</a>	“Our belief is that news is bad to the extent that it results in a cognitive, behavioral, or emotional deficit in the person receiving the news that persists for some time after the news is received.”	23
<a href="#">Bor et al. (1993, p. 70)</a>	“Conventionally the concept of bad news pertains to situations where there is either a feeling of no hope, a threat to a person's mental or physical wellbeing, a risk of upsetting an established life-style, or where a message is given which conveys to an individual fewer choices in his or her life.”	8
<a href="#">Dibble and Levine (2010, p. 707)</a>	“Any piece of information whose valence falls below threshold renders a judgment of bad news, and senders will behave in ways already known to be consistent with bad news delivery.”	4
<a href="#">Cusella (1980, p. 369)</a>	“In the behavioral sciences, positive feedback has generally been equated with favorable feedback or praise while negative feedback has typically referred to unfavorable feedback or criticism.”	2
<a href="#">Kluger and DeNisi (1996, p. 255)</a>	“This article is about FIs[feedback interventions] defined as actions taken by (an) external agent (s) to provide information regarding some aspect (s) of one's task performance.”	2
<a href="#">Andoni et al. (2018, p. 1497)</a>	“For the purposes of this study, DDN [delivering difficult news] is defined as being the first healthcare provider to share unexpected, potentially life-altering health information with a patient or family.”	1
<a href="#">Bies (2013, p. 137) <sup>a</sup></a>	“This leads to the definition of bad news as information that results in a perceived loss by the receiver, and it creates cognitive, emotional, or behavioral deficits in the receiver after receiving the news.”	1
<a href="#">Arber and Gallagher (2003, p. 166)</a>	“A simple definition of bad news is that of information that is perceived to be in some way bad or unwelcome.”	1
<a href="#">Sobczak et al. (2018, p. 2398)</a>	“‘bad news’ is any form of diagnosis related to permanent or relatively permanent changes in the organism that requires continuous or long-term medical treatment, or a therapy focused on pain management.”	1
<a href="#">Sprouls et al. (2015, p. 153)</a>	“The delivery of negative feedback suggests that a behavior or task was not performed correctly, thus indicating that a change of behavior is needed to demonstrate successive behaviors toward a goal.”	1
<a href="#">Covello (1992, p. 359)</a>	“The exchange of information among interested parties about the nature, magnitude, significance, or control of a risk”	1
<a href="#">Varner (2008, p.3)</a>	“A discussion between two or more people where the stakes are high, options vary, and emotions run strong.”	1

*Note.* The number of papers citing the source does not add up to the reported overall number of definitions, as some papers note multiple definitions in combination.

<sup>a</sup> Definition provided by [Bies \(2013\)](#) to delineate bad news. However, [Bies \(2013\)](#) describes a more expansive conceptualization that outlines the delivery of bad news throughout his article.

to one actor and outcomes, making it difficult to determine if the sender was effective in how the news was delivered.

Second, the delivery of bad news has been defined according to the context in which it is delivered. For example, research has examined the delivery of negative performance feedback (e.g., Chory & Kingsley Westerman, 2009; Geddes & Linnehan, 1996; Ilgen & Davis, 2000) and layoff notices (e.g., Clair & Dufresne, 2004; Kilpatrick, 1988; Skarlicki et al., 2008; Wiesenfeld, Brockner, & Thibault, 2000). However, this strategy risks creating silos of knowledge and inadvertently implying that what “works” for one context (e.g., providing negative performance feedback) may not translate to other processes (e.g., conducting a layoff). This is problematic because the effectiveness of the delivery is related to the sender's experience, frequency of exposure, and availability of guidance (Du Plessis & van Niekerk, 2017).

Third, the delivery of bad news has been defined as a process that occurs through interactions between two parties (e.g., Covelto, 1992; Varner, 2008). Although some definitions focus on the interplay between parties during a single interaction (i.e., as the news is being delivered), Bies (2013) is the only one to describe a three-stage process in which senders prepare to deliver bad news, senders engage in an interaction with the recipient to deliver the news, and then senders assist the recipient with the transition after receiving the bad news.

Fourth, the above approaches have also been combined. For example, medicine often defines bad news delivery inclusively (characterizing it as an outcome and a process) and also contextualizes it to align with specific aspects of the healthcare environment.

In sum, the four types of conceptualizations differ concerning their focus on the actor and under which context they are applied. This causes conceptual ambiguity and impedes generalizability, by capturing only single actors' perspectives and generating variations in conceptualizations that are dependent on the respective study focusing on either outcome or the content of the delivery. However, Bies' (2013) process approach captures the phenomenon in its full emergence, proposing an important opportunity for creating conceptual clarity and unity.

### 3.2. Issue #2: Differences in conceptualizations generate atheoretical research approaches

The diversity of conceptualizations highlights the range of constructs and differing theoretical assumptions that characterize the delivery of bad news. Symptoms related to the lack of conceptual clarity are also present in the literature, including construct proliferation (i.e., a lack of discriminant validity amongst conceptualizations) and difficulties determining the theoretical relationships between the many variables identified in our review. Given that clear conceptual definitions are the building blocks of theory, it is perhaps not surprising that the literature has been primarily using an atheoretical approach (78% of studies did not use a theory). When theories are used (i.e., 37% in management, 33% in psychology, 9% in medicine), they mainly focus on the sender's perspective and the psychological or emotional processes that may impact how senders manage the delivery of bad news and/or the challenges that senders can face.

The most commonly used theoretical approach has been attribution (10 articles), followed by control (Carver & Scheier, 1982; 9 articles), goal setting (Locke & Latham, 2006, 8 articles) and politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987; 8 articles). Other theories include media richness (Daft & Lengel, 1986; 6 articles), justice (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; 6 articles), and coping (Lazarus, 1993; 5 articles). Despite the tendency for conceptual definitions to focus on the recipient (e.g., their outcomes, the processes in which recipients experience bad news, and how to help recipients transition after receiving bad news, see Bies, 2013 and Buckman, 1984), our review revealed that few studies used theory to investigate the perspective of recipients. However, those that did tend to focus on coping (e.g., Shin, Kim, Kim, & Son, 2020) and social cognitive theory (e.g., Bipp & Kleingeld, 2018; Cianci, Schaubroeck, & McGill, 2010). Similarly, few studies applied theory to explore the interplay between the sender and recipient perspectives. Exceptions include Skinner (1953), who used reinforcement theory, and Burgoon, Stern, & Dillman (1995), who advocated for future research applying interaction adaption theory to explain the mutual influence between actors.

Taken together, clarifying the conceptual definition of bad news delivery is critical to provide a strong conceptual foundation that can identify key theoretical assumptions and therefore guide the choice of theory. Our review suggests that while there might be different reasons why bad news occurs (e.g., individual performance, health issue, economic downcast), the core definitional features of bad news delivery include the presence of “bad news” (i.e., a message that is likely to be perceived as negative by at least one party and that is perceived as negative prior to its delivery) as well as the explicit or implicit recognition of a sender, recipient, and the potential for dynamic interplay between perspectives. Conceptualizing the phenomena around these features would not only provide a strong conceptual foundation but would also create new opportunities to explore theories to enhance insights related to both actors and their interplay. That is, clarifying the conceptual definition can provide the basis for enhancing theorizing as well as ensuring alignment between conceptualizing and theorizing.

## 4. A critical analysis of the empirical scope of bad news research

Our interdisciplinary, integrative review reveals numerous insights related to the delivery of bad news. While we identified the senders' perspective to be the primary focus of the literature and that there has been a clear trend to focus on recipients' outcomes, the interplay between parties has, however, rarely been studied. In addition, research has only implicitly recognized the delivery of bad news as a process, has omitted to focus on positive outcomes in the short- and long-term, limited its insights to direct reports of bad news rather than the social contexts, and has primarily considered higher-status individuals to be senders of bad news.

In the following, we discuss four issues identified in our comprehensive literature review.



#### 4.1. Issue #3: Underemphasis on bad news delivery as a process

There has been a clear trend in the literature to focus on the sender and the challenges they face when delivering bad news, as well as recipients' reactions to receiving bad news. Although there are various insights for both actors available that examine bad news delivery as a negative event, these studies only implicitly acknowledge a process-view of the phenomenon. That is, the studies examine the challenges senders identify, which stem from expectations of negative personal consequences or challenging reactions of employees (i.e., future-oriented), while they also implicitly assume the recipients' reactions to be based on how they evaluate the sender and the delivery process (i.e., past-oriented). Yet, the respective study designs do not account for these temporal co-dependencies that would map bad news delivery as a process. In the following, we outline the status quo of the literature and challenge the current trend.

For senders, many loathe the delivery of bad news (e.g., Du Plessis & van Niekerk, 2017; Folger & Skarlicki, 1998) and a significant volume of studies have attempted to identify the challenges senders can face when engaging in bad news delivery. For example, ineffective bad news delivery may be due to experienced/anticipated emotions (e.g., discomfort, guilt, stress; Mohr, Milgrom, Griffiths, & Nomikoudis, 1999; de Valck, Bruynooghe, Bensing, Kerssens, & Hulsman, 2001), a perceived lack of ability to manage the situation (e.g., adequate training, follow-up questions, Chiò & Borasio, 2004; Skarlicki & Latham, 1996), or traits such as low core self-evaluations or trait empathy (Hillebrandt et al., 2021; Patient & Skarlicki, 2010). In addition, the likelihood of senders delivering bad news is also linked to fears of potential threats to their legitimacy (e.g., Bies, 2013; Kingsley Westerman, Reno, & Heuett, 2018), employee retaliation (e.g., Geddes & Baron, 1997; Kupritz & Cowell, 2011), or being the target of criticism (e.g., Folger & Skarlicki, 1998; Harris, 1994). Senders may also be concerned about the negative impact that they may have on recipients and/or their relationship with recipients. For example, senders may fear offending, demoralizing, or hurting the recipient as well as damaging their relationship (e.g., Dibble & Levine, 2013; Geddes & Baron, 1997; Harris, 1994), and are more hesitant to deliver bad news to employees in whom they have low levels of trust (Cox & Credo, 2014). Importantly, perceiving these challenges related to the delivery of bad news can impact managerial attitudes and behaviors who aim to maintain a beneficial social relationship and favorable evaluations (e.g., Bond & Anderson, 1987; Maynard, 1996) by physically distancing themselves and/or avoiding delivering bad news (e.g., Folger & Skarlicki, 1998; Lavelle, Folger, & Manegold, 2016).

In contrast, studies that focused on recipients primarily investigated these actors' reactions and outcomes to bad news delivery. As such, receiving bad news is related to a wide range of HRM outcomes, including decreased trust in performance appraisal systems (Harris, 1994; Jahn & Brühl, 2019), negative workplace behaviors (Geddes & Baron, 1997), diminished motivation (Andiola, 2014; Fong et al., 2019), a decline in performance and engagement (Fedor et al., 2001), less commitment (Belschak & Den Hartog, 2009), and decreased goal setting (Ilies & Judge, 2005). Receiving bad news may prompt recipients to have more negative attitudes towards the sender (Anderson, Buchko, & Buchko, 2016) and/or avoid the sender (e.g., Hughes, 2000). For example, Varty et al. (2021) demonstrated that employees' upward biases negatively impact perceptions of their manager, such that employees tended to perceive female managers as less legitimate after female managers delivered bad news compared to their male counterparts. Recipients may also engage in impression management strategies, such as enhancing performance to avoid future negative encounters with the sender (Andiola, 2014) or fighting back to prevent the negative news from reflecting on themselves (Hughes, 2000).

While these studies consider bad news delivery as a negative event that creates challenges and (negative) consequences for both senders and recipients, research under this thematic umbrella only implicitly adopts a process-based perspective. This is, the above-mentioned studies implicitly recognize the temporal nature of bad news delivery, including how senders' cognitions, emotions, and behaviors before delivering the news may impact whether and how they deliver the news (i.e., future-oriented). Similarly, recipients' reactions depend on perceptions of the sender and how the news was delivered (i.e., past-oriented). Only a limited number of studies examined the delivery of bad news as a process evolving over time (e.g., Larson, 1989; Maseko, Zhou, & Tsokota, 2020; Ptacek, Leonard, & McKee, 2004; van Fleet, Peterson, & van Fleet, 2005). For example, Martin et al. (2015) demonstrated that empathy and anxiety before the delivery more strongly predicted how senders behave during and after the delivery than sadness or insecurity.

Adopting a process-based perspective would more accurately consider the temporal scope of bad news delivery while it would also acknowledge the co-dependence of earlier perceptions with later reactions in both senders and recipients. However, to further promote this process-based notion, a conceptual definition is needed first that recognizes bad news delivery as a process, while also adequate study designs and methodologies need to be appraised.

#### 4.2. Issue #4: Examining the interplay between actors is rare

While our review identified some relational variables, few studies have empirically investigated the dynamic interplay between the parties over time. Studies across disciplines clearly prefer to set the focus on either one actor of bad news delivery (e.g., sender or recipient), with only a few studies simultaneously focusing on both actors. Studies that adopt this approach, however, have typically been published in medicine. They assess sender/recipient preferences and to what extent they converge (e.g., Baer et al., 2008; Fan et al., 2019; Rassin, Levy, Schwartz, & Silner, 2006). For instance, Sharp, Strauss, and Lorch (1992) outlined how patients prefer a caring physician, while physicians prefer to be perceived as highly confident. Likewise, Rassin et al. (2006) showed that parties to the delivery of bad news might have disparate preferences for support and various communication strategies (e.g., expression of emotions; the use of thoughtful silence). This suggests that disparate preferences and expectations might cause challenges when delivering/receiving bad news, making it important to address this limitation in future research.

Yet, challenges associated with the interplay between the parties (e.g., incongruence in values between managers and employees) have rarely been examined, nor have factors related to higher levels of analysis (e.g., degree of shared leadership in team contexts).

These gaps are especially important to address given that the delivery of bad news is typically nested within higher levels (e.g., dyads, teams), with emergent properties that may impact senders' willingness and/or ability to deliver bad news. There are indications that such approaches may be especially informative. For example, [Wayne and Kacmar \(1991\)](#) found that subordinate impression management can prompt managers to inflate performance feedback and adapt their communication style. Similarly, [Oç, Bashshur, and Moore \(2015\)](#) showed that senders who receive negative feedback from recipients about the fairness of their behaviors subsequently enact more fair behaviors. Taken together, it is critical to further explore similarities and disparities in perceptions of actors, as well as the dialectic processes that may influence how the delivery of bad news unfolds and its implications for the involved parties and their relationships.

#### 4.3. Issue #5: The neglected focus on opportunities and positive dynamics

While it is typically assumed that receiving bad news is detrimental to senders and recipients in various ways (e.g., legitimacy, loss of job, negative emotions), there is some evidence that positive outcomes can emerge for recipients if the delivery of bad news is effectively managed. Delivering bad news effectively might prevent negative outcomes (e.g., retaliation; [Skarlicki et al., 2008](#)) and promote positive outcomes (e.g., perceptions of effectiveness and fairness; [Gilliland & Schepers, 2003](#); [Kupritz & Cowell, 2011](#); [Richter et al., 2018](#)). These are important findings, especially because perceptions of fairness have been associated with a wide range of positive outcomes (for meta-analytic reviews, see [Colquitt et al., 2013](#); [Rupp, Shao, Jones, & Liao, 2014](#)). For example, recipients can experience enhanced resilience via the creation of growth narratives ([Vough & Caza, 2017](#)) or by engaging in meaning-finding (e.g., [Saldanha & Barclay, 2021](#)). This suggests that it is important to not only examine the 'delivery' (i.e., the act of communicating the news) but also the 'transition' (i.e., how individuals process and cope) as this can have important short- and long-term implications for recipient outcomes.

Although our review indicated emerging trends in the literature to foster research on positive outcomes, these outcomes typically focus on recipients, omitting the positive consequences senders might face when delivering bad news effectively (e.g., enhanced legitimacy, developing skills and experience to increase future effectiveness). This limits our insights concerning how managers might benefit from delivering bad news effectively by promoting fairness and creating growth narratives, creating a crucial domain for future research.

#### 4.4. Issue #6: A narrow focus on direct reports

There has been a clear trend in the literature to focus on direct reports of bad news delivery, such as employees being terminated, or employees receiving negative performance feedback. However, medicine and education have identified a broader spectrum of recipients negatively affected by bad news delivery (e.g., close relatives and how to best support them; [Abdelmoktader & Abd Elhamed, 2012](#); [Boyd, 2001](#); [Tang et al., 2017](#)). Recognizing this broader scope of roles highlights the social nature of bad news delivery, including the importance of managing the delivery of bad news not only for the direct recipient but also those in the social context that may be impacted by the news. This is reinforced by evidence suggesting that recipients may socially construct shared perceptions, even when this is not intended. For example, people can feel unfairly treated simply by observing the unfair treatment of others in the social environment (e.g., [Hillebrandt & Barclay, 2017](#)). In addition, recipients may also experience negative outcomes from others within the social environment, such as when survivors of downsizing events engage in physical and psychological avoidance due to shame, guilt, and perceived unfair practices involving their laid-off colleagues ([Hughes, 2000](#); also see [Brockner, 1990](#)). Thus, it is important to also recognize the social context and how this may impact not only the initial recipient but also their families, coworkers, and teams.

#### 4.5. Summary

While our review identified broad insights derived from research on the delivery of bad news, there are also significant gaps, especially related to the notion that bad news delivery is a process, the dialectic interplay between senders and recipients, positive outcomes, the social context, and status differences. Addressing these gaps is likely to reveal key theoretical insights into the dynamic social processes underlying the delivery of bad news, what behaviors may be (dys)functional during this interplay, and the implications that can emerge for the individual as well as the dyad, team, or the broader social context. Thus, it is important to delve deeper into the delivery of bad news as a dialectic phenomenon to provide a richer understanding.

### 5. Critical analysis of practical guidance on how to deliver bad news effectively

While our review discovered numerous communication strategies for how to deliver bad news, the number of strategies and recommendations make it challenging to derive clear guidance and practical applications. In addition, it remains unclear whether some communication strategies are effectively applied in isolation only, or more effective in combination. Despite scattered and limited recommendations across disciplines, the medical literature has provided several standardized stepwise protocols on how to approach and execute the delivery of bad news that have also been modified to meet the various contextual and cultural differences. These protocols have, except for one study (see [Richter et al., 2016](#)), so far not been integrated into the HRM context but represent a promising area for promoting evidence-based guidance for effectively delivering bad news in the workplace.

### 5.1. Issue #7: “When” lacks specification and insights

Some of the insights that are available from the review focus on the ideal timing of the delivery of the news during the communication process. For example, while it is important to deliver bad news in a timely fashion (e.g., Colquitt, 2001), what it means to be “timely” may differ depending on the nature of the news. Generally, bad news that has immediate consequences should be delivered swiftly so that the recipient can attend to and adjust to the new circumstances quickly. However, delaying the delivery of bad news can be beneficial when the situation is still evolving, such that there is a need to engage in sensemaking of what happened and how this impacts the recipient before delivering the news (e.g., Baker & Hernandez, 2017). Importantly, this is distinct from stalling, in which the sender avoids delivering the news to avoid the unpleasantness of having to do so (Folger & Skarlicki, 2001; Maynard, 1996). Moreover, senders who engaged in stalling during the delivery (e.g., delayed the delivery of the bad news by more than 2 min while meeting with the recipient), tended to evoke confusion and frustration in recipients (Shaw, Dunn, & Heinrich, 2012). This suggests that the recipient’s reactions are closely related to the specific time point at which bad news is delivered.

Despite these first insights, more general approaches concerning the ideal time to deliver bad news remain in short supply. For example, none of the included papers discussed the month, day, or time of the day in which bad news should be delivered. However, this would be critical information for organizations and leaders scheduling negative performance feedback or layoffs and assist in promoting positive outcomes for senders, recipients, and organizations.

### 5.2. Issue #8: Avoiding negative affect as a double-edged sword

Our review found contrasting findings on the effect (negative) emotions have on senders and recipients. While senders may benefit from preparing themselves for the delivery of bad news (e.g., by rehearsing the delivery; Bies, 2013), they also need to be aware of the potential impact of their moods/emotions on the delivery of bad news. For example, senders who are experiencing a negative (versus positive) mood typically provide more negative feedback and less polite messages, especially those who are inexperienced in providing feedback (Forgas & Tehani, 2005). Indeed, scholars have recommended that senders should curtail negative affect prior to delivering bad news (e.g., Scott, Garza, Conlon, & Kim, 2014).

However, there are important caveats to this recommendation. In some cases, senders may find that expressing negative emotions can convey that the bad news should be attended to (e.g., the recipient needs to work harder; Sy, Côté, & Saavedra, 2005), but these displays of emotion must be authentic to be effective (e.g., Bonaccio, O’Reilly, O’Sullivan, & Chiochio, 2016). Similarly, experiencing anxiety specific to delivering bad news may encourage senders to enhance behaviors that reflect interpersonal sensitivity (see Hillbrand et al., 2021), but general anxiety may prompt senders to avoid delivering bad news (e.g., Folger & Skarlicki, 2001). Thus, besides negative consequences, negative emotions might prompt positive outcomes and increase the effectiveness of the delivery, requesting a deeper scholarly discussion on the different characteristics and mechanisms of emotions during the delivery of bad news.

### 5.3. Issue #9: Blame and plausibility creating variations in reactions

Research has discussed contextual factors related to the workplace for the delivery of bad news. While people are generally reticent to deliver bad news, the characteristics of the message as well as the magnitude of consequences may impact how senders approach the delivery of bad news (e.g., Dibble, 2014; Tesser, Rosen, & Batchelor, 1972; Uysal & Öner-Özkan, 2007; Westerman, Heuett, Reno, & Curry, 2014). However, important aspects that require further attention are the controllability of the situation, anticipated severity, and the likelihood of the bad news encounter taking place can serve as important determinants of how senders approach the delivery of bad news (Legg & Sweeny, 2015). For example, while senders might be more inclined to deliver bad news for which there are external consequences to blame (e.g., financial crisis, pandemic), they might hesitate to deliver bad news for which they might be responsible (e.g., mismanagement). This places the emphasis on the fact of who is to blame for the bad news (i.e., scapegoating, see Bies, 2013) and leaves it unanswered if employees’ reactions differ if they are told that their performance is responsible for the bad news (i.e., internal factor) or an unforeseen event (e.g., external factor).

The broader social context can also create challenges, such as when there is a general lack of transparency within the organization (Baker & Hernandez, 2017) or legal constraints on what information can be provided (e.g., Heher & Dintzis, 2018). This clearly limits senders in deciding what to include in the delivery of the news (e.g., how to attribute blame), while also setting them under additional pressure to manage their own and their employees’ emotions and pay attention to not violate corporate norms and legal restrictions. These examples suggest that there are many variations in how recipients react to the delivery of bad news given the story and reasons they were told during the delivery and how plausible they are in the respective setting.

### 5.4. Issue #10: Lost in translation of multiple communication strategies

Senders may use a variety of communication strategies when delivering bad news to manage perceptions related to their responsibility for the bad news. Yet, some strategies have shown to be more effective than others, backfire when applied multiple times, and/or are susceptible to cultural norms (see Li et al., 2008; Tang et al., 2017). The sheer number of recommendations and the varying effectiveness makes it difficult to come up with clear guidance on how to deliver bad news effectively. To provide guidance for senders, we identified major themes the literature on communication strategies has focused on.

First, research has discussed the impact of the medium with which senders deliver bad news. For example, negative news is more likely to be distorted in a more positive way if it is delivered in one-on-one communication settings (i.e., face-to-face) compared to

communication channels that do not require face-to-face interaction with the recipient (e.g., mail, Colletti, 2000; Jeffries & Hornsey, 2012; Sussman & Sproull, 1999; Waung & Highhouse, 1997).

Second, communication strategies center on minimizing personal consequences and image threats for senders, with some causing opposite effects if applied multiple times. For example, senders may invoke blame management strategies (e.g., disclaimers) in which they try to deflect blame from themselves to protect the social relationship and/or their identity (e.g., Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). Indeed, while providing excuses (versus justifications) may protect the sender from being blamed (Shaw, Wild, & Colquitt, 2003), extensive use of this strategy may undermine its effectiveness (Bies, 2013). Similarly, senders may use impression management to “look fair” (Greenberg, 1990, p. 111). However, this may backfire by making recipients doubt the message's sincerity, prompting negative recipient behaviors (e.g., retaliation; Skarlicki et al., 2008).

And lastly, the language used to communicate bad news is critically important, including how the message is framed. While deception and the use of jargon should be avoided (e.g., Bavelas, 1990), senders often struggle with how to deliver the news “honestly [...] although not bluntly” (Girgis & Sanson-Fisher, 1995, p. 2453). There is some evidence that using implicit language, in which recipients must infer meaning, can soften the news and its impact while remaining comprehensible to the recipient (e.g., “the news is not good” versus “the news is bad”; Del Vento, Bavelas, Healing, MacLean, & Kirk, 2009, p. 444). Similarly, rather than using personalizing language (e.g., “you have”; “I have”), language that externalizes the news to a particular issue may help recipients process and accept the news (e.g., “there is” or “it would appear”; Del Vento et al., 2009, p. 446). Avoiding value-laden or derogatory language can also elicit more positive reactions from recipients (Waung & Jones, 2005). Additionally, senders may benefit from leveraging other language techniques to convey the news in a digestible format. For example, storytelling may prepare recipients for the news and/or help convey meaning (e.g., Kawashima, 2017), and using metaphors may enhance learning from poor organizational performance and create positive learning experiences (e.g., Danisman, 2017). Providing the news in broader or more abstract terms, followed by more specific details, can also enhance recipient understanding.

In sum, there are various insights available on how to deliver bad news that make it complicated for senders to decide how to do so effectively. Albeit the studies demonstrated that these strategies are effective, it remains unclear how these communication strategies can be combined to enhance effectiveness, how the frequency of applying these strategies impacts their effectiveness, or how different contextual factors, such as organizational or cultural constraints, enhance/deteriorate their applicability.

##### 5.5. Issue #11: Overlooked recipients' expectations and preferences

Research linked to HRM processes that involve bad news delivery has introduced limited communication strategies that can alleviate negative experiences for recipients. The few studies that did so highlight the need to enable recipients to prepare themselves that bad news is coming (e.g., forecasting; Bies, 2013; Maynard, 1996; Porensky & Carpenter, 2016), acknowledge the recipient's needs to minimize threats (Lee, 1993), focus on interpersonal sensitivity and empathy (Holmvall, Stevens, & Chestnut, 2019; Patient & Skarlicki, 2010), and select communication strategies based on the recipient's characteristics and needs (e.g., considering the recipient's personality, preferences, goals, and/or clues provided by body language; Brown et al., 2016). In addition, there is evidence that recipients can better process the information if an explanation rather than the bad news itself is delivered first (Jansen & Janssen, 2011). Certainly, recipients can find the message easier to understand and are more likely to perceive the sender as competent and empathic. However, the effectiveness of these tactics has not been studied in tandem with sender characteristics and/or within the context of sender-recipient relationships. Indeed, while research has alluded to the importance of considering and responding to recipients' needs, few studies have outlined how to do so.

An exception comes from medicine, where recipients' preferences for how they want the news to be delivered as well as how recipients process, cope with, and recover from negative news has been of paramount importance (e.g., Back et al., 2011; Cavanna et al., 2009; Fujimori et al., 2007; Tang et al., 2017). For example, recipients typically prefer having the opportunity to discuss options and ask questions, being told in person rather than on the phone, having honest communication (e.g., Brown, Parker, Furber, & Thomas, 2011), and prefer senders who are sitting because they appear to be more compassionate as compared to standing senders (Bruera et al., 2007). Also, oncologists are trained to actively assess their patients' ability to cope and how best to convey the news (e.g., some patients may prefer to receive facts, whereas others may prefer emotional support). Similarly, oncology research has suggested that recipients' reactions are likely to depend on the nature of the news and its meaning, especially when the news is incongruent with their expectations or has a broader negative impact (e.g., occurring along with other challenging life events; Kirby et al., 2020). Applied to the workplace, this suggests that recognizing recipients' preferences and expectations as well as managing the nature of the news and its meaning is critically important.

The medical literature also hints at the importance of effectively transitioning after the news has been delivered. For example, senders may provide a proposal on how to address the issue that considers the recipient's reactions and provides the recipient with the opportunity to respond, followed by a collaborative discussion on how to address this issue in which the sender and recipient create consensus on how to move forward (e.g., Kawashima, 2017). Providing a path forward is important, even when the bad news may end the sender-recipient relationship. For example, Pugh, Skarlicki, and Passell (2003) found that employees may experience heightened cynicism and lack of trust in their new employers after a layoff. Thus, delivering bad news in a way that facilitates recovery and mitigates negative outcomes is crucial.

Our review revealed that recipients' preferences and expectations are of paramount importance in deciding on communication strategies. This is because research hints at the dialectic nature of bad news delivery by advocating that senders customize the delivery of bad news by aligning recipient preferences with communication strategies (e.g., Butow et al., 1996; Kamali & Illing, 2018), and tailoring strategies to the recipient's needs can also enhance acceptance and promote positive outcomes (e.g., commitment; Brockner &

**Table 4**  
Consolidated list of stepwise evidence-based guidance on how to deliver bad news.

	Step 1 Before the Delivery	Step 2 Transition to Delivery	Step 3 During the Delivery	Step 4 Responses to the Delivery	Step 5 Closing the Delivery
<i>Approach</i>	Prepare and plan the setting	Assess how much the recipient knows already and how much they may want to know	Deliver the news	Respond to the recipient's emotions and discuss the implications of the news	Strategy and summary
<i>Explanation on the procedure</i>	Preparing for the encounter by considering legal, organizational, and personal factors that may influence the exchange, reviewing the records, and considering cultural factors	Consider what the recipient suspects or understands about the situation prior to delivering the bad news	The sender delivers the bad news in a genuine manner and is sensitive to the reactions of the person receiving the bad news	The sender is attuned to how the recipient is receiving the news. Be prepared to either end the meeting (if needed by the recipient) and reconvene when the recipient is better situated to continue or proceed if the recipient is able to continue	The sender works to help the recipient determine how to proceed next
<i>Focus Techniques</i>	<p>Sender-centric</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Supportive and quiet environment</li> <li>• Managing time constraints and interruptions</li> <li>• Gathering resources and information</li> <li>• Deciding on communication format</li> <li>• Deciding on who will deliver the news among those joining the encounter</li> <li>• Ensuring adequate time</li> <li>• (Mental) rehearsal</li> <li>• Being aware of the self and the surrounding</li> </ul>	<p>Recipient-centric</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asking open questions</li> <li>• Reading body language</li> <li>• Establishing agreement on open communication</li> <li>• Engaging with the recipient</li> <li>• Providing vocal/non-vocal warning or forecasting</li> <li>• Allowing a short pause for the recipient to prepare mentally</li> </ul>	<p>Sender-centric</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relying on the use of examples and existing performance expectations</li> <li>• Giving accurate and reliable information</li> <li>• Providing information simply and honestly</li> <li>• Being sensitive to the recipient's culture, race, and religion</li> <li>• Avoiding delays</li> <li>• Being aware of own posture and facial expressions</li> <li>• Being prepared for emotions to arise</li> <li>• Providing an apology</li> <li>• Encouraging the recipient to express their feelings</li> </ul>	<p>Recipient-centric</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allowing time for absorption and ventilation</li> <li>• Acknowledging emotions</li> <li>• Showing sensitivity (e.g., naming the recipient's emotions)</li> <li>• Understanding the recipient's fears</li> <li>• Tolerating silence</li> <li>• Treating the recipient with respect and dignity</li> <li>• Use of empathic &amp; supportive statements</li> <li>• Use of affective words and phrases (e.g., deep regret, encouragement lines, sharing anxieties, express gratefulness)</li> <li>• Validating responses</li> <li>• Exploring with open questions</li> </ul>	<p>Sender-centric</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Remaining genuine and compassionate</li> <li>• Providing a time frame</li> <li>• Providing a precise summary, wrap up</li> <li>• Offering assistance</li> <li>• Providing information about support services</li> <li>• Planning next steps</li> <li>• Asking if there are any other questions</li> </ul>

Wiesenfeld, 1996). Therefore, a stronger emphasis on both senders' and recipients' preferences is required to develop effective communication strategies.

### 5.6. Issue #12: Lack of stepwise protocols in management

While the above practical insights have been extrapolated from studies and, thus, lack instructions concerning their co-application, medicine has developed explicit guidance and provided evidence-based stepwise protocols (i.e., actions, principles, or steps that the sender should undertake when delivering bad news) that combine guidance on how to effectively deliver bad news to overcome negative outcomes. For example, there is the well-established SPIKES protocol (i.e., setting, perception, invitation, knowledge, emotion, summarize; Baile et al., 2000), the BREAKS protocol (i.e., background, rapport, explore, announce, kindling, summarize; Narayanan et al., 2010), or the PEWTER protocol (i.e., prepare, evaluate, warning, telling, emotional response, regrouping; Keefe-Cooperman & Brady-Amoon, 2013). All of the mentioned protocols provide stepwise guidance for senders to alleviate the burden of delivering bad news. McGuigan (2009) also offered an expanded protocol that includes steps focusing on the recipient (e.g., identifying and prioritizing recipients' concerns, checking on information needs, and identifying recipients' support networks).

Generally, these protocols share similar guidance related to preparing and evaluating the context, the delivery of the news, the reaction of the recipient, and discussing next steps. These protocols are aimed at facilitating the process of delivering bad news for senders (i.e., sender-centric steps) and directing their focus to the needs of the recipients to promote effectiveness (i.e., recipient-centric steps). For example, the protocols typically emphasize providing recipients with the time and space to process the news during its delivery. Due to their stepwise approach, these protocols facilitate the importance of treating the delivery as an interactive conversation, with the opportunity for recipients to ask questions and for senders to provide clarifications. That is, rather than the sender simply delivering a message to the recipient, these protocols emphasize that the delivery of bad news involves interplay between the parties. Table 4 provides scholars with a consolidated overview of the protocols' guidance (i.e., approach and explanation of the procedure), highlights the actors involved in the different stages (i.e., focus), and lists communication strategies for each step in the delivery process.

Differences between the protocols occur in the number of steps proposed, with those offering more steps providing more detailed guidance for senders. Protocols have also been contextualized for specific areas of application (i.e., medical, counseling; Baile et al., 2000; Keefe-Cooperman, Savitsky, Koshel, Bhat, & Cooperman, 2018), specific content (e.g., cancer versus dementia diagnoses; Azu et al., 2007; Bennett, de Boos, & Moghaddam, 2019), job roles (e.g., doctor, nurses; Bumb et al., 2017; Friedrichsen & Strang, 2003), cultural norms (e.g., Brazil, India, Japan; Baig et al., 2018; Kawashima, 2017; Pereira, Calônego, Lemonica, & de Barros, 2017; Tang et al., 2014), and communication settings (e.g., face-to-face, online; Beukema, van Velsen, Jansen-Kosterink, & Karreman, 2017; Gonçalves Júnior, do Nascimento, Pereira, & Moreira, 2020). Importantly, Richter et al. (2016) provided some evidence that using a stepwise protocol for HRM processes can be beneficial. Yet, this is the only study to integrate one of the protocols into a general workplace setting.

### 5.7. Summary

Taken together, the available evidence suggests that there are underlying principles that can transcend contexts and that general guidance can be informative. However, it may also be helpful to contextualize the protocols to recognize unique elements related to distinctive features of a specific type of bad news, specific roles, and/or special circumstances (e.g., contextual factors related to the workplace). Moreover, while the protocols implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the interplay between senders and recipients, detailed guidance is not typically provided for how to manage these dynamics. This suggests that there are significant opportunities to further expand these protocols, including recognizing and providing guidance on how to manage the dynamic interplay between parties over time, build agreement, and how to continue to manage the situation after the news has been delivered (i.e., how to effectively engage in transition processes).

## 6. Creating a path forward

Our review identified several challenges related to studying the delivery of bad news. Below, we discuss opportunities that stem from our critical appraisal of the literature and create a research agenda that can further advance our conceptual, theoretical, and practical understanding to effectively manage the delivery of bad news at work.

### 6.1. Opportunity #1: Conceptualizing the delivery of bad news as a dialectic process

Given the importance of conceptual clarity for advancing a field of inquiry toward a state of maturity (e.g., Podsakoff et al., 2016) and the presence of core commonalities revealed by our review, we argue that the time has come to provide a common definition of this phenomenon. Doing so is especially important for enhancing conceptual clarity and enabling scholars to share evidence-based knowledge more effectively across contexts. Building on the commonalities identified by our review, we propose that the delivery of bad news should be conceptually defined as a *dynamic and socially constructed situation in which the information being shared between at least two parties (a sender and recipient) is perceived to have negative valence by at least one party*.

There are several noteworthy elements of this conceptualization. First, rather than prioritizing one perspective over another, this conceptualization recognizes the importance of understanding the perspectives of both the sender and recipient as well as how these

perspectives can dynamically influence each other. This is especially important because the lens through which a phenomenon is studied can shape the insights that can be derived (e.g., [Bies & Tripp, 2002](#)). For example, primarily focusing on the sender's perspective is likely to overlook considerations for recipients, whereas recognizing these considerations may enable senders to more effectively manage the delivery of bad news. Thus, broadening and clarifying our conceptual lens can provide a more comprehensive understanding of bad news delivery, including potential differences between actors.

Second, the proposed conceptualization explicitly recognizes a temporal component by classifying bad news delivery as a dynamic and socially constructed phenomenon that unfolds as the parties influence and adapt to each other's reactions over time. This expands the focus of bad news delivery to include the preparation and the aftermath/transition (also see [Bies, 2013](#)), which can focus scholars on providing a more robust set of guidelines for the delivery of bad news, and direct practitioners on carefully managing the process of bad news delivery. This highlights the importance of theories that can tap into dynamic and social processes underlying these exchanges. Doing so is likely to provide novel insights into how the meaning of the delivery of bad news is socially constructed, how (multiple) parties can dynamically influence each other, and how this interplay can impact how the delivery unfolds (also see [Castillo & Trinh, 2018](#); [Shamir, 2011](#); [Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009](#)).

Third, rather than providing disparate definitions for each context in which bad news delivery occurs, this conceptualization identifies the core elements of the delivery of bad news. This can facilitate a common understanding and language for scholars studying the delivery of bad news. Moreover, this can prevent construct proliferation (e.g., multiple names for similar constructs). Said differently, providing a generalized definition can move specific elements to the position of moderators rather representing "different phenomena". For example, studying the impact of the news content, power differentials between parties, or responsibility/blame for the negative news as moderators may facilitate a common understanding without the need for distinct constructs (for a similar approach in the aggression literature, see [Hershcovis, 2011](#)). This will be especially beneficial for continuing to build an integrated foundation of findings across contexts, thereby preventing silos and offering a consolidated understanding.

Lastly, referring to bad news as having perceived negative valence by at least one actor instead of negative consequences for the recipient provides a broader and more inclusive conceptualization. This recognizes the subjectivity of bad news, allowing senders and recipients to have different judgements of what bad news is or is not. Moreover, this disentangles bad news delivery from outcomes, which is important for enhancing conceptual clarity, distinguishing this phenomenon from other constructs in its nomological network, and facilitating predictive validity (see [Podsakoff et al., 2016](#)).

## 6.2. Opportunity #2: Empirical approaches that capture the dialectic exchange

Within the broader management literature, numerous calls have been made to empirically recognize the interplay between managers and employees as well as how these dynamics unfold over time (e.g., [Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009](#); [Cropanzano, Dasborough, & Weiss, 2017](#); [DeRue & Ashford, 2010](#)). Moreover, there have also been calls to move beyond focusing on a single perspective and/or an action-reaction pattern (e.g., a single instance of how a manager/sender acts and how the employee/recipient responds) and towards capturing dynamic social processes in which the parties experience a back-and-forth sequence of interactions (e.g., [Hemshorn de Sanchez, Gerpott, & Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2021](#)). Consistent with these calls, empirically examining the delivery of bad news as a dialectic phenomenon (i.e., a dynamically and socially constructed process defined by the interplay between actors) can illuminate our theoretical understanding and enhance practical guidance.

A dialectic approach also highlights the importance of understanding the delivery of bad news as a temporal process that unfolds over time. Yet, studies investigating bad news delivery longitudinally are rare and none of the reviewed papers included designs that model interpersonal dynamics between actors or how they mutually influence each other. Indeed, the literature has been dominated by cross-sectional studies, which provide a snapshot of the delivery and often focus on one perspective only. To capitalize on and align with the conceptualization of bad news delivery as a dialectic phenomenon, it is important to leverage methodologies that can provide a nuanced understanding of interpersonal and temporal dynamics. For example, applying methodologies that are designed to capture dyadic and longitudinal processes is likely to provide insights into the relational patterns and dynamic interplay that can emerge (e.g., [Halliwell, 2015](#); [Kim et al., 2020](#)).

This can also open exciting new research avenues. For example, recognizing that the delivery of bad news extends beyond notification of the delivery itself creates opportunities to examine how senders and recipients can recover from bad news (e.g., repair/redefine their respective identities, reestablish mutual trust in the relationship). This also suggests that the outcomes of bad news delivery may change over time. For example, consider an employee who receives negative performance feedback. The employee may initially experience a drop in performance (e.g., due to cognitive load associated with processing the bad news). However, once the information is processed, the employee may be better able to perform (e.g., due to clarified performance expectations). Moreover, having received support from their manager may enhance the relationship with and perceptions of the manager. An initial decrease in performance related to bad news delivery may translate into enhanced performance, well-being, and feelings of connection. Thus, incorporating temporal considerations into theorizing, and considering what outcomes may emerge in the short and long term may be beneficial (e.g., [George & Jones, 2000](#)).

Moreover, it may be fruitful to investigate how to develop shared perceptions related to the meaning of the bad news as well as how to deliver the news in ways that can support mutual trust. Similarly, exploring self-other-agreement (see [Atwater & Yammarino, 1997](#)) in the context of bad news delivery may be beneficial to address and manage perceptual differences that are likely to emerge (see [Bies, 1987](#)). That is, identifying how perceptual incongruence may emerge, how it can impact the delivery of bad news, and how to mitigate it may be helpful for curtailing damage from the bad news and for repairing damage to relationships (e.g., broken trust). While the literature has primarily adopted a positivist approach, social constructionist approaches may provide a better understanding of how

parties within the delivery of bad news socially construct/create meaning. For example, organizational discourse analysis (e.g., Fairhurst & Uhl-Bien, 2012) can enable scholars to delve into the identity construction and sensemaking processes that may emerge. Similarly, as bad news delivery may also create interpersonal tensions between actors, relational dialectic theory and its associated methodologies (e.g., Halliwell, 2015) may provide valuable sources of explanations for the construction of meaning.

Taken together, it is important to ensure alignment between the conceptualization of the delivery of bad news and the methodologies that are used to investigate this important phenomenon. Applying these methods to the delivery of bad news can enable researchers to elucidate the process, including congruence between senders and recipients or how the parties can mutually influence each other through the social construction of meaning (Kim et al., 2020). This is consistent with current trends in the broader literature focusing on time and temporal processes (e.g., Aguinis & Bakker, 2021), and also with the notion that the delivery of bad news is a process that unfolds over time and through multiple interactions (e.g., Bies, 2013). As such, we encourage scholars to examine the delivery of bad news to broaden the methodological toolkit to enhance our understanding of the socially constructed, dynamic, and dyadic processes that underlie a dialectic approach to bad news delivery.

### 6.3. Opportunity #3: Acknowledging the multiple levels of analysis

When exploring interactions that may involve an interplay between the characteristics of senders/recipients and/or their (dis)agreements, scholars have noted the importance of adopting a dyadic approach (e.g., Kim et al., 2020). However, within the contemporary bad news delivery literature, there has been a tendency to focus on how individuals are impacted by higher levels (e.g., organizational factors) rather than capturing how the parties are nested within higher levels of analysis (e.g., dyads) and how this nesting can impact the delivery of bad news. Whereas focusing on the individual level of analysis can provide deep insights into each actor, this focus may yield an incomplete understanding of distinct dyadic and/or group processes that may emerge. That is, incorporating multi-level theorizing may shed light on processes and outcomes that occur at higher levels (e.g., dyadic processes, relational outcomes) that are important for understanding the process of delivering bad news (e.g., Hitt, Beamish, Jackson, & Mathieu, 2007). Given that theoretical processes typically differ at various levels of analysis (e.g., Batistič, Černe, & Vogel, 2017; Kozlowski & Klein, 2000), this can also expand the theories that can be applied and developed to further enhance theoretical insights.

This suggests that there are significant missed opportunities to explore how characteristics of the parties (and the dynamic interplay between them) can impact how the delivery of bad news unfolds and the relationships between the parties. As an example of the dyadic level, consider managers and employees who are differentially motivated during the delivery of bad news (e.g., a manager who is motivated to validate a 'fair manager' identity versus an employee who is motivated to protect against threat). This can focus managers and employees on disparate aspects of the situation, leading to vastly different interpretations (see Barclay, Bashshur, & Fortin, 2017). This may require the parties to work together to socially construct shared meaning. However, their ability to do so may be constrained or facilitated by aspects of their relationship (e.g., lack of trust; shared communication preferences). By contrast, managers and employees that experience unresolved perceptual disagreements may experience detrimental outcomes and/or find that the delivery of bad news has detracted from the dyadic relationship (e.g., created mutual distrust or tension in the relationship). Thus, exploring dialectic processes within the dyad can provide a more informed understanding of both perspectives and the way through which the parties socially construct meaning.

Given that dyads are typically embedded within social contexts (e.g., social networks, organizations, cultures), studying how these broader levels can impact the dialectic processes between managers and employees may also be beneficial. For example, Kim et al. (2020) outline how nested dyads (i.e., a manager with multiple subordinates) can create dependencies in outcomes. Applying this notion to the context of bad news delivery can create new research questions, such as how the manager's delivery of bad news to one subordinate may have reverberating effects and/or create contagion throughout each of the manager-subordinate dyads or teams. Similarly, the way that the manager treats one subordinate may create social comparisons across dyads or teams, thereby impacting the reactions of multiple employees. The broader social context may impact what is perceived to be effective bad news delivery, such that the contextual system around the dyad (e.g., team, department) may create barriers and/or facilitators that can impact the way that the delivery of bad news is interpreted and responded to (for a similar argument in the forgiveness literature, see Bies, Barclay, Tripp, & Aquino, 2016).

Taken together, recognizing the multiple levels of analysis creates new opportunities to theorize and enhance our theoretical understanding. Taken together, it is critical to examine how levels of analysis may impact bad news delivery.

### 6.4. Opportunity #4: Recognizing the good in the bad

Implicit in the above is the notion that the delivery of bad news does not have to be a wholly negative experience for both managers and employees. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that the delivery of bad news can result in positive outcomes through the interplay between parties. For example, Anderson et al. (2016) noted that "a healthy balance of positive and negative feedback provides an authentic view of the employee's current state in the organization" (p. 698). Similarly, evidence from marketing research suggests that effectively responding to negative feedback may enhance commitment (Tax, Brown, & Chandrashekar, 1998), such that managers who are receptive to receiving negative news from employees may be able to further strengthen the relationship. The delivery of bad news may also create opportunities to share meaning about the supportive nature of the relationship, effecting beneficial outcomes for the employee (e.g., enhancing perceptions of support) and the manager (e.g., validating the manager's identity as a fair and compassionate leader; Swann, 1987). For example, managers who engage in sensegiving may be able to frame the bad news in ways that are easier for recipients to understand and accept (Maitlis & Lawrence, 2007) and that facilitate meaning-making (e.



g., by highlighting learning opportunities or by helping recipients process how to effectively move forward, for a recent review see Whittle, Vaara, & Maitlis, 2023). Managers who effectively manage the delivery of bad news may reinforce characteristics and/or enhance perceptions of managerial effectiveness not only for their employees but also for themselves (see Lord, de Vader, & Alliger, 1986). Over the long term, this may enhance managers' construction of a positive identity, which can increase their ability to claim leader identities or pursue advanced management opportunities (see DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Ibarra & Babulescu, 2010). For recipients, this may enable them to create growth narratives (Vough & Caza, 2017) and build resilience (e.g., Saldanha & Barclay, 2021). Thus, it is critical to examine long-term outcomes, especially because the benefits of bad news may need time to emerge.

#### 6.5. Opportunity #5: Clarifying who is to deliver the bad news

Besides examining positive outcomes, it is also important to explore how the source of the news may impact the dialectic processes that emerge. Managers delivering bad news on behalf of the organization may be less likely to accept personal responsibility, which can impact how they interact with the recipient and the recipient's perceptions of sincerity (e.g., Dewitt, Treviño, & Mollica, 2003). Similarly, managers who must consult with others to address recipient questions may find that the recipient is also evaluating their general competence in navigating organizational processes and ability to advocate on the recipient's behalf. From a recipient's perspective, an employee who is being disciplined or laid off may have different reactions to this news depending on whether the news is communicated by their line manager, an HR manager that they do not have a pre-existing relationship with, or by a team that includes people with different relationships with the employee (e.g., supervisor, HR, legal). Employees who receive an automated email informing them of bad news may project their perceptions of the automated system as uncaring or impersonal onto management, thereby making the dialectic processes between managers and employees more difficult to manage (for a recent example, see Duffy & Thorbecke, 2023). In a related vein, teams with shared leadership structures may find that informing a team member of poor performance is interpreted/responded to differently when the news is communicated on behalf of the team or by multiple senders (e.g., the recipient may feel outnumbered by multiple senders and respond negatively, or the recipient may feel positive because one of the team members has discreetly shared concerns of multiple people in a way that enables the recipient to save face). Taken together, focusing on the messenger in future research will shed light on the implications for all actors and the relationship between parties and may impact how the process of bad news delivery, and its implications, can be managed.

#### 6.6. Opportunity #6: Facilitating practical guidance

Although our review revealed the benefits of having stepwise protocols as well as highlighted multiple communication strategies, many of these focus on the sender's perspective exclusively or are still subject to evidence-based testing (e.g., Bies, 2013). Thus, developing evidence-based communication strategies that embrace a dialectic approach and contextualizing stepwise protocols to account for unique features of the relationship between managers and employees may be especially beneficial. For instance, managers may experience distinct demands in preparing news for delivery. This may include creating a "paper trail" to ensure that sufficient evidence has been gathered to support their concerns or allowing employees an opportunity for voice (e.g., permitting them to present arguments outlining their performance before a final decision about a promotion denial is made; see Bies, 2013). Similarly, the power dynamic between managers and employees and/or contextual features of the workplace may create unique barriers/facilitators that can impact the effectiveness of bad news delivery, and which need to be explored further. For example, the review showcased the many communication strategies managers can draw on and which appear to be effective in isolation. However, it remains unclear whether a combination of these strategies is more effective in promoting positive outcomes for both actors, or if certain contextual factors diminish the effectiveness of some strategies, or lastly, whether these communication strategies are also effective in employees delivering bad news to their managers. By clustering the strategies according to the process perspective of bad news, this creates multiple exciting avenues for future research that will likely promote practical guidance.

There is also the opportunity to focus more specifically on why bad news occurs, how it may impact recipients, and "when" it should be delivered. For instance, managers may find it more difficult to deliver bad news for which they are responsible (e.g., due to poor feedback, faulty attributions) versus those that are due to organizational failures (e.g., Folger & Skarlicki, 2001). The same bad news may also mean different things to recipients – for example, some employees may be devastated by a layoff whereas others may be happy since it enables them to retire. Similar to the insights from medicine, it seems important for managers to consider the meaning of the event for individual recipients and recipients' coping resources; recognizing that bad news is a subjective experience that may be interpreted and responded to quite differently by various recipients. Moreover, this also suggests that recipients may be better able to create positive outcomes from bad news when it is framed according to their needs and preferences. Finally, further investigating when bad news should be delivered is also critically important. Layoffs near Christmas frequently gain media attention and are criticized for their perceived inappropriateness of the timepoint (for recent examples, see Bindley, 2022; Sainato, 2022; Sherman, 2022; Telford, 2022). As such, understanding the constraints that may occur for different types of bad news may be informative as is deriving evidence-based knowledge on when bad news delivery should ideally take place. This could include examining public holidays' effect on (third-party) perceptions of bad news delivery or which weekdays (e.g., Monday, mid-week, or before the weekend) create positive or negative consequences for different actors. For example, an interesting avenue for future research would be to examine if bad news delivery on a Monday might cause work-family spillover effects on the weekend for the sender preparing the delivery (through increased stress), whereas recipients, in contrast, might benefit from more workplace interaction and peer support for dealing with the bad news during the week following bad news delivery on Monday.

By highlighting the core features related to the delivery of bad news, we also provide a foundation that can facilitate connections

with related literature to further enhance practical guidance for HRM. For example, to further extend our framework, the negotiation literature can provide insights into how two parties may resolve divergent goals through dynamic interactions (e.g., McShane & von Glinow, 2018), including strategies for senders and recipients to manage interpersonal dynamics (e.g., effectively using silence, the impact of mindsets; Curhan, Overbeck, Cho, Zhang, & Yang, 2021) and constraints that may emerge (e.g., gender biases; Dannals, Zlatev, Halevy, & Neale, 2021). Similarly, the post-traumatic growth literature may be especially helpful for identifying how to facilitate recipient coping (e.g., how recipients respond to a disruption, the dysregulation that can occur, the impact on identity, and how to shift towards positive outcomes; Maitlis, 2020). This literature may also provide helpful insights for managing specific forms of bad news (e.g., assisting those who are grieving; Petriglieri & Maitlis, 2019). Taken together, while there are practical insights and evidence-based guidance available to assist managers with the delivery of bad news, scholars should examine how to further expand and contextualize these insights to the HRM context and incorporate features of the relationship between managers and employees into evidence-based recommendations.

## 7. Conclusion

Our integrative review of more than six hundred papers on bad news delivery provides a panorama of the phenomenon and zooms into important areas that are likely to create significant advances in theory, research, and practice. Beyond critically appraising issues in the literature and linking them with opportunities that will push the field toward novel pathways, embracing the proposed conceptualization of a dialectic interplay can also create exciting opportunities to further illuminate theoretical insights as well as enhance practical guidance for effectively managing the delivery of bad news. Additionally, our review highlights the need to develop and further test evidence-based practical guidance, especially because many find the delivery of bad news to be daunting and difficult to manage. Given the importance of effectively managing bad news, we encourage scholars to continue to pursue theoretical insights and translate these into evidence-based practical guidance to enhance effectiveness.

## CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Claudia C. Kitz:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Funding acquisition. **Laurie J. Barclay:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Funding acquisition. **Heiko Breitsohl:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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The authors have no competing interest to declare.

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