Writing Literature Reviews: A Reprise and Update

Human Resource Development Review (HRDR) is dedicated to publishing high-quality, non-empirical manuscripts, with a particular focus on “review” articles. Thus, the purpose of this editorial is to refocus authors (and readers) on what constitutes a good literature review article by building on and extending the earlier HRDR works of Torraco (2005) and Callahan (2010). The editorial describes the characteristics of rigorous literature reviews (such as the integrative literature review and alternative forms of literature reviews) to help authors clearly frame their work, apply the appropriate methods for documenting their work, and execute the depth of argumentation necessary to support their work.

In 2005, Torraco offered a description of writing integrative literature reviews; 5 years later, I followed up with an article that identified the distinguishing characteristics between integrative literature reviews and conceptual frameworks (Callahan, 2010). While integrative literature reviews and conceptual frameworks are the two most common forms of manuscripts published in HRDR, other forms of review works are also published here. These can be categorized as alternative forms of literature reviews, and they share some, but not all, of the characteristics of integrative reviews. This editorial seeks to clarify these differences and offer suggestions for authors writing any type of literature review. While the term integrative literature review has become ubiquitous in the field of human resource development, there are many other types of literature reviews and HRDR accepts a wide variety of manuscripts that are non-empirical in nature—such as methodological reviews, historical reviews, conceptual reviews. For a detailed description of the types of works the journal publishes, see the journal Aims & Scope at http://www.sagepub.com/journals/Journal201506/title#tabview=aimsAndScope.

Historically, formal syntheses of research can be traced to the 17th and 18th centuries (Booth, Papaioannou, & Sutton, 2012). However, discussions of such syntheses today typically refer to contemporary reviews of the literature through the late-20th century. These more recent reviews tended to be narrative in nature, and were often written to support an argument proposed by the author (Kennedy, 2007; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). In other words, they could be very much like a conceptual framework manuscript (Callahan, 2010; Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). However, researchers and funding agencies in the medical sciences, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, sought what they considered to be more credible reviews that were driven by evidence-based results and that clearly and explicitly identified and appraised existing research (Booth et al., 2012). Their efforts gave rise
to the Cochrane and Campbell Collaboratives which pioneered the methodology of the systematic literature review. Thus, the systematic literature review became one of the first explicitly recognized forms of literature review in the late-20th century. Typically, although not always, systematic literature reviews are based on primary empirical studies (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005).

Other unique forms of literature review include the integrative literature review (Callahan, 2010; Torraco, 2005), the historic literature review (Callahan, 2010), and the rapid structured literature review (RSLR; Armitage & Keeble-Allen, 2008), among many other types of literature reviews (see Booth et al., 2012, for more descriptions). The integrative literature review is a particularly broad form of studying the field of existing literature because it can encompass a broad array of scholarly literature—empirical, non-empirical, conceptual, theoretical—to address a particular phenomenon (Kennedy, 2007). The historic literature review reconstructs, constructs, or deconstructs (Munslow, 1997) the understanding of some past phenomenon (or the development of a contemporary phenomenon) through the lens of literature that captures historic forces (Callahan, 2010; http://www.huidziekten.nl/diversen/opleiding/CATDatabase/guidetowritingreviews.pdf). The RSLR (Armitage & Keeble-Allen, 2008) is much like an integrative literature review, but it is distinct in that it specifies the inclusion of practical and policy-related literature along with the more traditional scholarly literature.

The Importance of Literature Reviews

Literature reviews are important to this field because they have “made substantive contributions to the knowledge base of human resource development” (Torraco, 2005, p. 356). Syntheses of existing literature on any given phenomenon are important because they improve evidence-based decision making (Tranfield et al., 2003; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), they identify gaps in knowledge about particular phenomena (Booth et al., 2012), they identify synergies within existing literature (Booth et al., 2012), and they narrow the gap between knowledge and “lore” in the field (Kennedy, 2007). Furthermore, literature reviews are important in the publishing process for at least two reasons—several high-impact journals exclusively publish review articles and the high citations often attributed to review articles are useful for enhancing the reputation and readership of both the author and the publishing journal (Denyer & Pilbeam, 2013).

Characteristics of Literature Reviews

A wide variety of works have been made available that highlight the characteristics of different types of literature reviews (e.g., Denyer & Pilbeam, 2013; Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009; Torraco, 2005; Tranfield et al., 2003; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). From those works, I identified at least five distinct characteristics that are representative of rigorous literature reviews. Literature reviews should be concise, clear, critical, convincing, and contributive.

These “Five C” characteristics of rigorous literature reviews can be described as follows:
Concise: Literature reviews should be concise syntheses of a broad array of literature on a given topic. Perhaps most importantly, there must be a specific guiding question or premise for the review (Torraco, 2005). Not surprisingly, the question is best derived by addressing an area in which there is an identifiable need for an answer; this is typically referred to as “the gap” in the literature that calls for exploration. This gap, however, is not about whether or not studies have explored the phenomenon of interest, but rather that the existing literature is lacking in some way with respect to the specific question that guides the review (Denyer & Pilbeam, 2013).

Clear: Clarity of the processes for collecting the “data” that form the foundation of the literature review is vital for a rigorous review; and, frequently, submitted manuscripts fail to clearly articulate the methods used in conducting the literature review. As Torraco (2005) and Denyer and Pilbeam (2013) recommended, creating a structured system (such as a matrix) for each “artifact” identified for the review during data collection will improve the rigor, quality, and clarity of the final literature review. The steps (Callahan, 2010) in Table 1 highlight the components that authors should consider and capture as they collect and organize their data. When crafting the method section for the literature review itself, it is important that each of these issues be addressed (see Table 1).

Most, if not all, of the literature reviews submitted to this journal confine the “how” question identified in Table 1 to databases and keywords used. For a truly rigorous review, this is not adequate. Greenhalgh and Peacock (2005) found that literature reviews that are limited to formal, pre-defined search strategies of databases and keywords “may fail to identify important evidence” (p. 2). In fact, they found that the most successful methods of identifying relevant literature were through “snowballing”—tracking references in articles that were found by other means and using reverse citation tracking to find articles that cited articles already deemed relevant to the review.
Critical: Rigorous literature reviews include both critical reflection (Denyer & Pilbeam, 2013) and critical analysis (Denyer & Pilbeam, 2013; Torraco, 2005). Reflection refers to the positionality that authors should consider when reviewing and analyzing the literature of the data set—their assumptions, beliefs, and values that influence the ways in which they interpret the literature and subsequently craft insights (Denyer & Pilbeam, 2013). Analysis refers to the assessment, or critique, of the literature itself (Torraco, 2005). Such analysis “often exposes knowledge that may be taken for granted or hidden by years of intervening research” (p. 362).

Convincing: After critically analyzing the data, a convincing argument must be developed. This represents the findings of the literature review, or the synthesis that follows the analysis. Given the analysis of the data collected, articulate a unique way of interpreting the synthesis presented and provide supporting rationale (Denyer & Pilbeam, 2013). The review can be structured in many different ways to most clearly depict the justification for the argument (e.g., guiding theories or competing models) (Torraco, 2005); mechanistic organization (such as chronological or alphabetical listings) of the literature, however, generally do not lend the support necessary to create a convincing rationale for the uniqueness of review. The keys to this characteristic of literature reviews are what “new model, conceptual framework, or other unique conception” (Torraco, 2005, p. 362) emerges from the analysis, and how can the data be used convincingly to justify this emergent finding?

Contributive: Like other forms of research, literature reviews must also contribute to the body of knowledge (Torraco, 2005). Rigorous literature reviews offer significant contributions to extend or create new theory (Torraco, 2005), improve practice (Torraco, 2005; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), or influence policy (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). In addition to providing recommendations for theory and practice, literature reviews should reveal areas in which more research is needed (Denyer & Pilbeam, 2013; Torraco, 2005).

Conclusion

Exemplary literature reviews—be they systematic, integrative, historical, rapid structured, or some other type of review—are challenging to produce. There is a growing body of literature on the methods of producing rigorous literature reviews, some of which have been referenced here. The purpose of this editorial was to consolidate some of the key characteristics of literature reviews to provide an accessible source of information for those seeking to write literature reviews. The mnemonics provided here, five C’s of literature review characteristics and six W’s of literature review methods, are meant to guide authors as they prepare literature reviews, in particular for Human Resource Development Review.

Jamie L. Callahan

Drexel University, Philadelphia, PA, USA
References


