Strengthening Your Literature Review

A. Rebecca Reuber

All articles, whether they are conceptual or empirical, contain a literature review. Knowledge is accumulated incrementally in scholarly fields, and a literature review is a key element in this process. The literature review frames an article by positioning it against past research. It is an important part of an article for all its readers: reviewers, Family Business Review (FBR) readers, and scholars who will follow in that research stream. A strong framing can be enormously influential in the review process by convincing reviewers that your scholarly field will benefit from knowing about your research. A clear framing makes it easy for readers to follow an author’s logic and understand the choices that have been made in conducting the research. Once an article is published, a thorough and articulate literature review provides a useful synopsis of a body of research for scholars working in that area and for scholars working in adjacent areas who want an accessible entry point into that body of work. In other words, it provides another reason—beyond the findings themselves—for an article to be read and used.

Literature reviews are normally positioned at the start of an article and so not only are important in themselves but also are influential in setting expectations about what is to come. A literature review that is creative, thoughtful, and thorough leads to positive first impressions, and these are likely to influence how the remainder of the article is perceived. Conversely, a weak literature review sets initial expectations negatively, reducing the persuasiveness of later arguments and increasing skepticism of the author’s research skills.

Despite the importance of a well-researched and well-written literature review, reviewers are frequently disappointed by those that cross their desk. Therefore, as part of FBR’s series of Editor’s Notes, we are providing some suggestions on ways in which authors can increase the value of their literature review before submitting their manuscript for publication. Outlined below are the attributes that characterize a strong literature review.

Signals a Fit Between the Research and the Journal

Most academic journals have ongoing conversations about different topics, and people pay attention to the journal because they are interested in these conversations. Therefore, authors can increase interest in their paper if it is clearly linked to ongoing conversations in the field and in the journal to which it is being submitted. A straightforward way to do this is to cite previous articles published in the journal. If you are not building on anything that has ever been published in a particular journal, it may be that your paper is better suited to another journal. A related consideration for a specialty journal like FBR is that your paper needs to be relevant to the area of specialty. Because FBR is a publication “devoted exclusively to exploration of the dynamics of family-controlled enterprise,” all articles considered for publication need to be relevant to our understanding of family firms.

To gauge fit, reviewers and editors pay attention to the reference list of submitted articles and consider both the nature and caliber of publications in this list. Family business is a field growing at rapid pace, with a large number of new scholars joining the field each year, and so we encourage authors from different disciplines to familiarize themselves with the literature in family business studies before submission. Toward this end, the broad reviews in recent field articles provide a helpful start (e.g., Chrisman, Chua, & Sharma, 2005; Chrisman, Kellermanns, Chan, & Liano, 2010; Sharma, 2004). A focused review on a specific topic can also be a useful starting point, for example, recent reviews of

1University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, Canada

Corresponding Author:
A. Rebecca Reuber, Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto, 105 St. George St., Toronto, ON, M5S 3E6, Canada
Email: reuber@rotman.utoronto.ca
Motivates Your Research Question

“Fit” is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for your research to be interesting and relevant to a journal’s readership. It is also essential to have interesting and relevant research questions, which are motivated by a gap in our existing knowledge. Your literature review should identify this gap and provide arguments about why it is an important gap to fill. For example, in the literature review of a recent article on family capital, the authors clearly show that their study differs from prior research by including multiple dimensions of success, a broader conceptualization of family capital, and longitudinal data (Danes, Stafford, Haynes, & Amarapurkar, 2009).

It is important to recognize that doing a literature review is different than writing a literature review. Doing a literature is ongoing and should be wide ranging to allow you to gain and maintain a wide and up-to-date understanding of your subject area and the areas that relate to it, even tangentially. However, writing a literature needs to be tightly focused and purpose driven. Your literature review needs to be shaped by your research questions, and so by the time you write it, you need to be clear on what questions you are going to ask and answer. This means that while much of the prior research you have read will contribute to your understanding of a field, only a subset of it is likely to be included in the literature review of any one individual paper submitted for publication.

In motivating your research question in relation to past research, be as specific as possible and think about what your reviewers and readers will value. Some submissions, for example, spend too much time on broad arguments, for example, highlighting the importance of family businesses to the economy as a justification for studying them. Because reviewers and readers are interested in FBR, they already buy into the importance of family business, and so they are looking for a much narrower and deeper contribution. With the limited space that authors have to describe their research, the tight page limits for editors, and the short time span available from readers, it is important to position your research question in the current literature directly and succinctly.

Many great research questions are motivated by a “real-world” issue as well as a gap in the research literature, and your literature review should highlight this. For example, a motivation for a recent study of the internationalization of family firms (Claver, Rienda, & Quer, 2009) was interest in understanding the concrete ways in which these firms can manage the risks of foreign market entry.

Defines Your Key Research Constructs

Most research papers center around one or a few key constructs. These are what you have investigated in your research, conceptually and/or empirically, and normally appear in the paper’s title. These constructs should be defined in your literature review, and the definitions should be linked to use of the constructs in previous research, as Chen and Hsu (2009) did with their three key constructs of family ownership, governance, and R&D investments. For some of the constructs, there will be alternative, and sometimes inconsistent, definitions in past work. Your reviewers and readers are aware of this, and so for most papers, it is not worthwhile to spend a long time on the various possibilities. The exceptions to this rule are when a paper is focused on construct development, such as a recent review of the familiness construct (Pearson, Carr, & Shaw, 2008), and when you are studying definitional alternatives (e.g., Chua, Chrisman, & Sharma, 1999). Otherwise, simply state the definition you are using and why and briefly acknowledge the other definitions that exist. For an example of this, see a recent study of family capital (Danes et al., 2009).

Covers Past Research Thoroughly

The coverage in your literature review signals to reviewers how well you know this body of past research. It detracts from your authoritativeness as a subject expert if a reviewer identifies some key articles that were left out of your literature review. That being said, it is not desirable to be exhaustive and reference every book and article that has ever been written about a topic. If you are studying something like succession, for example, an exhaustive reference list would be overwhelming and drown out the rest of your paper. You need to include the
definitive, seminal articles on a topic and also the articles that are relevant to your narrow research question. For example, a recent comparison of the entrepreneurial orientation of family and nonfamily firms (Short, Payne, Brigham, Lumpkin, & Broberg, 2009) draws broadly on prior research on the entrepreneurial orientation construct and also more specifically on prior research about family firms that is relevant to each dimension of the construct.

**Covers Recent Research**

Recency matters too. It is unfortunately too common for a reference list to be dated, with only a handful of articles published in the past 5 (or even 10!) years. If you have presented your paper at several conferences and it has already gone through a review process at a previous journal, your original reference list is likely to be 3 or 4 years out of date, and your ideas can seem stale. Make sure you do a new literature search and update your literature review with each new submission. Most journals have articles available online before they get to print. Including a few pertinent in-press articles sends a strong signal that the authors are up to date in the topic and have assimilated new knowledge in their paper. Family business conferences are another source of current ideas and a way for authors to ensure they are not missing out on any conversations building up in the field.

**Has a Point of View**

A strong literature review is the outcome of a creative process and makes a contribution in itself. Rather than simply providing a description of relevant articles that have been published in the past, the authors should relate these articles to their research questions, sharing what is currently known and unknown about them. A literature review should provide new insights by integrating multiple strands of research and making sense of different approaches, concepts, and findings from prior work. Such an approach makes it easier for authors to creatively and clearly position their own research in the literature and also makes the paper more interesting to read. More insights about how to do this are provided by Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997).

In a multidisciplinary area like family business, there are opportunities to draw on ideas from several fields, which in turn enable family business researchers to give back to the disciplines from which they borrow (cf. Zahra & Sharma, 2004). For example, Barnett, Eddleston, and Kellermanns (2009) draw on identity and social identity theory for their study of roles in family and nonfamily firms, and their findings contribute to the field of identity by underscoring the importance of considering interpersonal identification.

**Is Well Written**

The literature review is a difficult part of a paper to write. Unlike the methods section, which has a relatively prescribed structure and content, the structure and content of your paper’s literature review are mutually dependent, and both are inherently related to your insights about how different ideas are related to each other. There are often choices about how to bundle and describe prior research. These bundling choices should be made to help you support your research questions and also to help you concisely summarize the literature. You need to think about the extent to which you are going to portray prior research as complementary (e.g., partly overlapping) or in tension (e.g., leading to different expectations).

A frequently used structure is to group studies with the same findings and contrast those to studies that have different findings. This structure emphasizes the mixed findings on a subject, which is useful to motivate the need, for example, for more definitional clarity about a construct. Alternatively, different theoretical perspectives might lead to different expectations that your research reconciles, and your literature review can highlight this. For example, Levie and Lerner (2009) argue that agency theory and the resource-based theory of the firm lead to different hypotheses regarding the performance of family and nonfamily businesses, but these can be reconciled if we take into account family capital, which is their focus.

Although you are writing for a scholarly audience, only some of your readers will be expert in your particular topic, and so you need to have a clear logical progression when you are laying out your arguments. It is helpful to have another scholar read over your literature review (and, indeed, your entire paper) before you submit it to a journal, to check whether your ideas are clear and well constructed.
Current Issue

The following research questions are addressed by articles and book reviews in this issue. The authors for each article are listed in parentheses.

- As compared to nonfamily firms, are family owned and managed firms more or less likely to downsize? Why? How is firm profitability affected by downsizing? (Block)
- What is the impact of succession on the financial structure and performance of small and medium-sized family firms in Belgium? (Molly, Laveren, & Deloof)
- How does the financial performance of family-controlled firms compare to that of their nonfamily counterparts in Chile? Is investing in Chilean family-controlled firms more or less risky than such investing in nonfamily firms? (Bonilla, Sepulveda, & Carvajal)
- What major cross-cultural variations in family firms are revealed by the current literature? (Gupta & Levenburg)
- What strategies have been found useful in Australia to influence policy makers? What lessons can be drawn from these experiences for other parts of the world? (Craig & Moores)
- What do we know about family firms in different regions of the world? (Gupta, Levenburg, Moore, Motwani, & Schwarz address this question in their book series titled Culturally-Sensitive Models of Family Business: The Collection, which is reviewed by Poza)
- What are some of the books that the distinguished researchers and practitioners honored with Family Firm Institute Fellow status recommend reading? (compiled by McCollom Hampton)

References


Bio

A. Rebecca Reuber is professor of strategic management at the Rotman School of Management, University of Toronto. She teaches in the entrepreneurship area, and her research focuses on the growth strategies and reputations of young firms.