Reviewing the literature or picking an argument:
A typology of literature usage in academic publications

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Few would argue that one of the essential components in the repertoire of a scholar in the field of management and organization is the ability to draw literature from diverse social-scientific sources to construct theoretically-based arguments that are clear, logical and internally consistent. Evidence of concern for theoretical rigour in relation to the acknowledgement and critical appraisal of prior published work is widespread. For example, most business research teaching programmes and text books allocate substantial space to the provision of advice on finding and using literature. Some seasoned editors of prominent journals have taken the trouble to explain the close relationship between good theorizing and success in publication. Indeed, every published research paper stands as a testimony of its writer's critical grasp (or lack of it) of the contribution of others.

However, because literature is used in different ways for different purposes, there can be no single approach or format for what is often vaguely referred to as a 'literature review'. As teachers of research students we have learned that, as a result of the diversity of literature usage, understanding and distinguishing the theoretical intent of particular pieces of published work can be difficult, particularly for inexperienced researchers. Those who search journals, books and databases in order to identify research gaps and pin down theoretical frameworks need to be able to understand the relationship between the purpose of a particular published theoretical argument and its underlying structural characteristics. Further, those who use literature to construct their own arguments need to be able to understand which approach to argument-building they are taking.

We propose that there are five 'ideal' types in the use of literature in academic writing. In common with most ideal types, the five do not always exist in their pure form. Sometimes two or more are combined in a single paper. The power of a typology, as with any classification device, lies in its immediate simplicity and accessibility. Each of our five ways of using literature has a distinctive purpose (for example, to demonstrate a gap in knowledge), and a distinctive output (for example, a research question). In this paper we describe the characteristics of the five elements in our typology, and provide illustrations drawn from exemplary publications. We aim to help the reader of a literature-based argument to know what kind of theoretical position is being taken, thereby speeding their passage to understanding the author's contribution.

Type 1

Purpose: Demonstrate a gap in knowledge
Output: Research question(s)

This approach is probably best characterized by conventional approaches to doctoral research where the candidate is required to justify a gap in the literature which will be addressed by their doctoral research. It may be that the literature raises limitations or questions about a particular issue or identifies a lack of empirical exploration in a particular area. Literature is used to map the domain and identify the gaps.

Type 2

Purpose: Argue a theoretical link between two concepts
Output: Hypothesis or proposition

Here the literature is used to make a connection between two conceptual areas and illustrate both the value and nature of the connection. For example it may be that the research is connecting the use of staff feedback systems to the quality of service experienced by customers. Both have established areas of literature which need to be explored and summarised. In this sense the literature is used to propose a link that hitherto did not exist.

Type 3

Purpose: Argue theoretical links between multiple concepts
Output: Model

The use of literature to build a more complex model – i.e. a series of concepts and connections – requires the author to weave together a set of inter-related domains such as the effect of a range of organizational aspects on the quality of service experienced by customers. The outcome may be a model showing the conceptual basis of a series of hypotheses or propositions which form the contribution of the paper. In this situation the literature provides a map of different domains and connections between them.

Type 4

Purpose: Compare and contrast different perspectives
Output   Classification/organization/typology

This type has some similarity to Type 2 in that two or more particular domains of literature are used, but the important difference is that in type 2 the focus is on particular concepts, whereas in this type the focus is on particular perspectives, where literature is being used in a broader sense to illustrate distinctive ontological assumptions in order to shed light on a particular issue.

Type 5

Purpose: Meta-review
Output   Audit of domain/hostorical overview of key sources

Type 5 is probably the closest to the descriptor of literature review. In this type the focus is to provide an exemplary account of a particular domain which is both comprehensive but which may also include some novel and insightful ways of classifying the work within the domain. We argue that whilst this is closest to the stereotypical literature review, such usage is relatively rare in publications in the management field.

We conclude by arguing that many of the deficiencies cited by leading editors in management journals, reviewers of journal papers, assessors of research proposals and examiners of doctoral candidates can be traced back to a lack of clarity concerning the purpose to which extant literature is being used. We consider some of the pathologies of literature use by scholars from doctoral students through to seasoned academics and suggest how the adoption of our five ideal types provides a potential mechanism to enhance the quality of literature usage in a range of academic work.