

Finding the needle: A review of reviews in management and organization studies

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Supplementary material S1 to the article: xxx

Introduction

A validly designed, transparently reported and thus replicable search is key for any systematic review of the literature. Clear and thorough descriptions of search parameters and strings are largely lacking in the management and organization studies (MOS) literature (an exception is Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). Even in-depth guides on how to conduct meta-analyses (e.g., Borenstein, Hedges, Higgins, & Rothstein, 2009; Hunter & Schmidt, 2004; Stanley & Doucouliagos, 2012) do not provide insights on how to set up a rigorous and efficient search strategy. One reason for poor methodological reporting of reviews in management and organization studies (Adams, Smart, & Huff, 2017; Jones & Gatrell, 2014; Lakens, Hilgard, & Staaks, 2016; Maggio, Tannery, & Kanter, 2011; Short, 2009; Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003) is that clear and thorough descriptions of search parameters and strings are largely lacking (an exception is Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). However, reviews need to be undertaken in a transparent

and heuristic fashion (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009) to provide impact in MOS (Short, 2009), no matter if the subsequent analysis is quantitative (e.g., meta-analysis) or qualitative in nature (Siddaway, Wood, & Hedges, 2019; Cooper, 2017).

Method

To empirically corroborate the observation that reviews of the literature in MOS vary in quality and suffer from poor reporting of the methodology (Adams et al., 2017; Jones & Gatrell, 2014; Lakens et al., 2016; Maggio et al., 2011; Short, 2009; Tranfield et al., 2003), a qualitative analysis of the method of recent systematic reviews and meta-analyses in top-ranked publications was performed. Using the Journal Citation Reports (JCR), we identified the 50 journals with the highest 5-year impact factor in each of the general categories *Management* and *Operations Research & Management Science*. To this we added journals from other JCR categories (mainly *Business/Finance*, and *Economics*), provided they 1) were mentioned in at least one additional ranking (Gomes, Barnes, & Mahmood, 2016; Ormans, 2016; SCImago, 2019) and 2) had a higher impact factor than the lowest-ranked journal on the 50-titles list (4,851; *Journal of Strategic Information Systems*).

With all but three of the resulting 72 journals included in *Business Source Premier* (hosted by EBSCO), we searched this database for systematic reviews and meta-analyses. The following search string was used across the abstract (AB), keywords (KW), subject (SU), and title (TI) fields: (systematic N5 review) OR (systematic N5 literature) OR "meta analysis" OR meta-analysis OR (meta* N3 review). Additionally, "peer reviewed" and a publication date from 2014 were applied as limits. The search was run on May 21, 2019 and retrieved a total of 538 articles from 32 different journals. A selection was made of the journals with the highest number of hits ($n > \text{five}$), resulting in 231 articles from 12 journals (see Table 1). After deduplication and screening, a set of 186

articles (systematic reviews or meta-analyses) were available to be reviewed. The number of reviews and meta-analyses published in these top journals in the last five years varied widely. The low number of review articles in prime journals has been lamented by the editors of the *Journal of Management Studies* (n = 13), because of the missed potential for theory building (Post, Sarala, Gatrell, & Prescott, 2020). Furthermore, we observe discrepancies between journal aims and the de factor reporting practices of authors: with the applied search string, leading outlets such as the *Academy of Management Annals*, which exclusively publishes reviews, only turns out to have published two papers that explicitly mention the either of the terms “review,” “meta-analysis,” or “systematic review” in the searched fields.

Table 1

Number of included articles per journal sampled based on impact factor and inclusion in rankings.

	Financial Times	Web of Science 5-year impact factor	Gomes et al. 2016	Scimago	Hits Business Source Premier	Hits after screening
<i>Journal of Management</i>	Y	12.909	Y	Y	55	44
<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>	Y	11.891	Y	Y	9	6
<i>Organizational Research Methods</i>	N	10.926	N	Y	5	1
<i>International Journal of Management Reviews</i>	N	10.017	N	Y	42	41
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	Y	8.829	Y	N	9	7
<i>Strategic Management Journal</i>	Y	8.356	Y	Y	7	6
<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	Y	7.924	Y	Y	17	13

<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	Y	7.508	N	N	50	35
<i>Journal of Organizational Behavior</i>	N	6.533	N	N	20	19
<i>Journal of Marketing Research</i>	Y	6.007	Y	N	6	4
<i>Management Science</i>	Y	5.555	Y	Y	5	5
<i>Long Range Planning</i>	N	5.404	N	Y	6	5
SUM					231	186

We coded whether authors reported on their search strategy and in how far they documented six elements that are essential (a) for a review to be systematic and (b) for readers to replicate the search on which the review is based: search strings; search limits; databases; number of hits; additional searches; documentation. These core elements of a systematic search strategy correspond to steps four, five, and six in the suggested six-step process below. The following analysis of the data is descriptive, followed by in-depth reading of the method sections to provide examples. The data on sampling, the final data set, and a log book are available via the authors' institutional repository (link will be added after peer-review).

Results

The sampled articles contained 121 meta-analyses (65.05 %), 57 systematic reviews (30.65 %), and eight other reviews (4.30 %). While there is a high degree of uniformity in the labeling of meta-analyses, this was less stringent for systematic reviews. Terms such as “eclectic review” or “systematic interdisciplinary review”, or the use of “systematic literature review” as a synonym or equivalent to systematic review indicate the lack of clarity regarding the narrative or systematic nature of reviews (Hodgkinson & Ford, 2014). Authors of meta-analyses, however, were less concerned with transparently reporting the search procedure (they report on average 2.68 of the

six core elements, whereas in the case of systematic reviews the mean is 3.07), even though this step is at the core of the following statistical analysis (Buckley, Devinney, & Tang, 2013).

While all but two articles (Dew, Grichnik, Mayer-Haug, Read, & Brinckmann, 2015; Liao, Dwayne, & Rousseau, 2016) reported on their search strategy, the extent and kind of information provided varied significantly across the sample. As illustrated by the following, rather extreme, example, a majority of the articles was insufficiently transparent on their search strategy: “We identified studies by a computerized bibliographic search in numerous databases for the terms ‘financial literacy’, ‘financial knowledge’, and ‘financial education’. We found 10,650 articles published from 1969 to 2013” (Fernandes, Lynch Jr, & Netemeyer, 2014, p. 1863).

Of the remaining 184 articles, authors reported on average 2.79 of the six core elements (Table 2). Only three articles (Knight, Patterson, & Dawson, 2017; Loignon & Woehr, 2018; Nguyen, de Leeuw, & Dullaert, 2018) report on all six elements, while a slightly larger number ($n = 4$) in the sample documents five out of the six elements (Bailey, Madden, Alfes, & Fletcher, 2017; Ellwood, Grimshaw, & Pandza, 2017; Franco-Santos & Otley, 2018; Goh, Pfeffer, & Zenios, 2015).

Most frequently mentioned were the databases searched (90.22 %) and the additional searches performed (77.17 %), such as citation tracking, hand-searching, contacting authors, or collecting grey literature. The latter two point to authors’ awareness of the role that unpublished or non peer-reviewed sources play in addressing the file drawer problem when conducting reviews (Adams et al., 2017; Dalton, Aguinis, Dalton, Bosco, & Pierce, 2012). The number of hits retrieved by a search was reported in more than half of the studies (61.96 %); this figure is important to judge the balance of sensitivity and sensibility when compared to the number of studies included in the final review.

A documentation of the search process, for instance in the form of a log book, is rare (5.43 %), albeit facilitating replicability (Gibbert & Ruigrok, 2010). When it comes to detailing the search strings, merely 11 articles (5.98 %) provide this central component for transparency and study replication. Eight out of these eleven articles correspond to the top reporters (reporting 5 or 6 categories) or appliers of the PRISMA/Cochrane protocols (Bailey et al., 2017; Ellwood et al., 2017; Franco-Santos & Otley, 2018; Galizzi & Navarro-Martinez, 2019; Goh et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2017; Loignon & Woehr, 2018; Nguyen et al., 2018). The limited number of best practice examples – including the other three articles that provide search strings (Atewologun, Kutzer, Doldor, Anderson, & Sealy, 2017; Dinh & Calabrò, 2019; Okwir, Nudurupati, Ginieis, & Angelis, 2018) – emphasizes the frequently sketchy manner of reporting the search strategy across the overall sample of reviewed articles.

Table 2						
<i>Percentage and number of articles detailing six core elements of a search strategy and citing methodological literature.</i>						
	Search strings	Search limits	Databases	Number of hits	Additional searches	Documentation
Percentage of articles (frequency) N = 184	5.98 (11)	37.5 (69)	90.22 (166)	61.96 (114)	77.17 (142)	5.43 (10)

On a descriptive level (given the small sub-samples), we observed differences in the average number of elements reported per journal (Table 3). Studies in half of the journals report three or more elements, with articles in *Management Science* scoring highest on average (3.6).

Systematic reviews or meta-analyses in the other half of the journal sample report less than the overall average of 2.79, with articles in the *Journal of Marketing* giving only 2.14 core elements.

Table 3 <i>Average reporting of the six core elements of a search strategy and reference to methodological literature per journal.</i>			
	Average score	Methodological literature cited: percentage (frequency)	<i>n</i>
<i>Management Science</i>	3.6	40 (2)	5
<i>Long Range Planning</i>	3.4	40 (2)	5
<i>Strategic Management Journal</i>	3.14	33.33 (2)	6
<i>International Journal of Management Reviews</i>	3.07	73.17 (30)	41
<i>Journal of Applied Psychology</i>	3.06	0	35
<i>Organizational Research Methods</i>	3.0	0	1
<i>Journal of Management Studies</i>	2.58	15.38 (2)	13
<i>Journal of Organizational Behavior</i>	2.53	15.79 (3)	19
<i>Journal of Marketing Research</i>	2.5	25 (1)	4
<i>Academy of Management Journal</i>	2.33	0	6
<i>Journal of Management</i>	2.3	15.91 (7)	44
<i>Journal of Marketing</i>	2.14	28.57 (1)	7
Overall	2.79	27.17 (50)	184

The adoption of existing protocols and frameworks, or the awareness of or reference to the methodological literature are both limited, as more than two thirds of the articles ($n = 134$, 72.83%) did not cite any methodological sources in their literature search section (Table 4). Of the articles that did ($n = 50$), most numerous are those published in the *International Journal of Management*

Reviews, most frequently referring to MOS-specific sources such as Tranfield and colleagues (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Denyer, Tranfield, & Van Aken, 2008; Briner & Denyer, 2012). Tranfield et al. (2003) was the most widely cited publication (56%). While Cooper and colleagues' publications (Cooper, 1984; Cooper, 2017; Cooper & Hedges, 1994; Cooper, Hedges, & Valentine, 2019) are mentioned in a significant number of reviews in journals other than the *International Journal of Management Reviews*, only two articles (Rudolph, Kooij, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2018; Lee, Kirkpatrick-Husk, & Madhavan, 2017) cited them in reference to the search strategy; all others to bias (e.g., Greco, O'Boyle, & Walter, 2015), coding (e.g., Breuer, Hüffmeier, & Hertel, 2016), or effect sizes (e.g., Klier, Schwens, Zapkau, & Dikova, 2017).

This is interesting when considering Rosenthal's early reference (1995, p. 184) to Cooper and colleagues as the source for meta-analysts not familiar with literature search. It becomes even more significant when breaking down the references' frequency per type of review. We then observe that meta-analyses mention methodological sources rarely (15 out of 121 articles, i.e., 12.4 %), while more than half of the systematic reviews refer to at least one (35 out of 65, i.e., 53.85 %). Finally, only two studies (Bailey et al., 2017; Galizzi & Navarro-Martinez, 2019) used PRISMA's flow diagram to document the search process, and only three referred to Cochrane as a methodological source (Goh et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2017; Rudolph et al., 2018).

Table 4 <i>Breakdown of most frequently cited (> 5) methodological literature, multiple categories can apply.</i>						
	Tranfield et al., 2003	Denyer & Tranfield, 2009	Cooper, 1984 and later editions	Cooper et al., 1994 and later editions	Hunter & Schmidt, 2004 and later editions	Other
Percentage of articles (<i>frequency</i>) citing method literature (<i>n</i> = 50)	56 (28)	12 (6)	16 (8)	28 (14)	12 (6)	54 (27)

Discussion

By and large, these results indicate a profound lack of attention to and consultation of the methodological literature on the search strategy and a disregard of the several more recent pleas for better reporting of reviews (Macpherson & Jones, 2010; Jones & Gatrell, 2014; Lakens et al., 2016's; right up to the present special feature). While Tranfield and Denyer's several contributions in the referred methodological literature is an indication of their lasting authority, it also underlines the need for an updated contribution specifically devoted to literature search. The review methodology's progressive adjustments from healthcare and medical research to the social sciences, brought forth from the complementary expertises of scholars and library information specialists (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016; Bramer, de Jonge, Rethlefsen, Mast, & Kleijnen, 2018; Higgins & Green 2011; Littell & White 2018; Moher et al. 2009; Petticrew & Roberts 2006), are still far too little known and used in MOS reviews.

The resulting methodological fuzziness and lack of transparency in reporting impedes readers to assess if a systematic review or meta-analysis is rigorous - let alone replicate - as

required for empirical studies to be relevant (Scandura & Williams, 2000). Furthermore, since the search strategy is at the heart of any systematic review or meta-analysis, ensuring that it is conducted in a rigorous manner is a necessary condition for an overall rigorous research process, as this greatly helps minimize bias at an early stage (King & He, 2005; Harris, 2005; Petticrew, 2001). For researchers “to be led by the available evidence, whatever that looks like” (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 754), rigor in the search process is a necessary precondition to identify all the evidence on a research problem. The poor average score of the entire sample, the low number of articles reporting the search strings or documenting their search, the very small set of top reporters that combine extended/full reporting practices with the partial adoption of methodological frameworks such as PRISMA and Cochrane, and the neglect of consulting search strategy literature show the need for a methodological update in systematic reviewing in MOS.

While rigor criteria are standard in a positivist research tradition, qualitative researchers may be skeptical as to adopting this natural science mode of quality assessment (e.g., Daft & Lewin, 1990; Pratt, 2008) for searches that result in a qualitative literature analysis. However, it is argued here that the search for any type of literature review needs to be rigorous to identify all the evidence on a research problem, such that researchers are “led by the available evidence, whatever that looks like” (Siddaway et al., 2019, p. 754). In addition, we follow Gibbert and Ruigrok’s argumentation (2010, p. 725) that even though “the two broad epistemological camps are in disagreement as to what specific labels to use when it comes to ensuring rigor (so-called primary reports, e.g. of construct validity, internal validity, generalizability, or external validity, and reliability), they do seem to be in at least partial agreement when it comes to the concrete research actions that are necessary to ensure rigor (so-called secondary reports, i.e., reporting of concrete research actions).”

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