

## EDITORIAL COMMENT

### CONSTRUCTING A LITERATURE REVIEW

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Since 2013, we have written a series of editorial comments with a view to aiding researchers and students to improve the quality of their articles and to aid the submission/review process. Following publication, these editorial comments are made available separately on the menu of the RIAE website under *How to publish (or perish)?* (<http://www.revistaiberoamericana.org/ojs/index.php/ibero/pages/view/publish%20or%20perish>). In the first of these comments, Ferreira (2013a) argued that a typical empirical article should be structured as follows: cover (including the title and author information), abstract, introduction, review of the literature, conceptual development and hypotheses, method, results, discussion, conclusions and references. In some of the later editorial comments, we went into more detail regarding each of these sections. Serra and Ferreira (2014a) addressed the title, abstract and key words of articles. Serra and Ferreira (2014b) discussed the possibilities and importance of preparing the introduction of an academic article, and Ferreira (2013b) discussed constructing the hypotheses.

With a view to examining the entire proposed structure for an empirical article, this editorial focuses on the Literature Review, also known as the Theoretical Framework. The literature review may be defined as “a documented review of published or unpublished works (articles, books, etc.) in specific fields of interest to the work of the researcher” (Ferreira, 2015: 36). It is to be found in conceptual articles such as empirical articles, whether qualitative or quantitative. It has a clear link to the article as a whole and provides support for the section on the development of the concept and the hypotheses/propositions that follow it in the structure of an empirical article (Reuber, 2010; Sparrowe & Mayer, 2011; Reay, 2014; Ferreira, 2015).

The literature review is an integral part of any academic work, and when it is well conceived, it serves as a basis for the advancement of knowledge in the field in question and identifies fields where research is lacking, enabling the development of a conceptual model (Webster & Watson, 2002). Its purpose is to explain what is known about the topic under study,

making it clear that there are unanswered questions and explaining why it is necessary to answer them (Reay, 2014).

In my desk review work as editor of the RIAE, many articles are rejected due to basic aspects of the preparation of the literature review, even though the articles themselves are relevant and examine interesting ideas. It should be highlighted that without a good literature review, it is not possible to convince reviewers and readers of the contribution that an article makes, i.e., the benefit that it brings to the field (Reuber, 2010). Before proceeding to the fundamental aspects of the literature review, it is important to clarify that the construction of theory will not be addressed here, as this aspect is directly related to the editorial comment on hypotheses that has already been published.

## 1 THE IMPORTANCE OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review serves several purposes. Although they are all important, I would highlight that it enables reviewers and readers to see that the author is well versed on the theme he is researching (Ferreira, 2015). As knowledge accumulates incrementally (Reuber, 2010), the review makes it possible to gauge the article in relation to previous knowledge by referring to prior research (Sparrowe & Mayer, 2011). I will now present important aspects of the literature review based on the texts of Reuber (2010), Sparrowe and Mayer (2011), Ferreira (2015) and Reay (2014).

A fundamental aspect of the literature is that it serves as a foundation for the entire article and helps to shape the conceptual model and hypotheses or propositions. It is the basis for the discussion of the results. In short, it helps to make the article coherent as a whole by positioning the article in relation to past research. A well-structured review shows the benefits an article brings to its field and aids the process of explaining the gaps and the contribution. This is helpful when the article is reviewed, as the reviewers can logically understand how the argument is constructed and how the authors chose their option. It also helps readers, especially from correlated fields, to have an overview of what has already been studied regarding the theme in question. To a professor, it is clear that the literature is another motive for reading articles and that it is one of the aspects that most encourages students to read them when drafting their dissertation or thesis.

An article that I enjoyed reading and often consult, not only for its contribution, and which serves as an example because of its construction, is that of Combs, Ketchen, Ireland & Webb (2011), entitled *The Role of Resource Flexibility in Leveraging Strategic Resources*, published in the *Journal of Management Studies*. The authors present the gap and the objective

of the study: *...theory dealing with the nature of leveraging remains underdeveloped. We develop the notion that strategic actions that successfully leverage one resource might not leverage another resource*. It is traditionally structured and, following the introduction, although it does not have a section with the heading Literature Review, the review is presented in two parts to position the article: *Leveraging strategic resources; Strategic resource characteristics and expansion strategies*. This second part, with two sub-items, leads to the conceptual model and hypotheses. I think that the relationship with the title is clear, as is the way it narrows down from the general theme of leveraging resources to the specific aspects.

Nevertheless, many articles begin by going straight to the conceptual model and hypotheses. Does this mean that the construction of a literature review is not important? No, it remains important. Two aspects appear to be influencing the suppression of the literature review in articles. The first is limited space. Most journals limit articles to 8000 words, including the abstract and references. The other aspect is that other sections are gaining relative importance, such as the importance of arguing the model and hypotheses logically and coherently and having a consistent discussion. The contribution needs to be evident and very clear (see Whetten, 1989; Sutton & Staw, 1995; Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). There is also greater demand in terms of sophistication in the section on methods. Consequently, this has broadened the dimension of this section and influenced the dimension of the results section (see Zhang & Shaw, 2012).

Even so, the author needs to construct his literature review to be able to discover the gaps and move to bridge them in the part that addresses the Conceptual Model and Hypotheses, even if it will not be published or be reduced to a few paragraphs in the final version of the article. Many examples of this trend can be seen in renowned journals. Recent articles of this kind include that of Zhu and Chen (2015), *CEO Narcissism and the Impact of Prior Board Experience on Corporate Strategy*, published in *Administrative Science Quarterly*; and that of Chakrabarti (2015), *Organizational adaptation in an economic shock: the role of growth reconfiguration*, published in the *Strategic Management Journal*.

It should be emphasized that the reviewer (and reader) of the introduction and literature review builds an expectation of what awaits him. A negative impression may result in a decision not to go ahead with the review or publication because it will lead to poorly supported hypotheses and inconsistencies regarding the contribution of the article. Not making the contribution clear has been the main factor when it comes to rejecting articles in the more respected international journals (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997), and this is also the case in the most high-impact Brazilian journals (Ferreira & Falaster, forthcoming).

## 2 MAIN PROBLEMS IN THE LITERATURE REVIEW

The problems found in literature reviews are directly linked to their solutions. Ferreira (2015) and Reuber (2010) pointed out a number of weak points in literature reviews in works that they evaluate as editors and reviewers. These included not focusing on the theme raised in the research question, the review addressing the results instead of the theory itself and the text being organized by author or work instead of concentrating on the subject that is the focus of the work, choice of references, poor quality of writing and choice of journal.

The sequence and structure of a study as an article requires an interesting and relevant research question. As mentioned by Reuber (2010), many research questions are motivated by questions from the “real world”, in addition to gaps identified by the literature. It should be said that even to arrive at a research question, the insights and observations involved require a great deal of reading on the subject even before a literature review can be conducted. A research question focuses on a gap to be filled in existing knowledge. The literature review needs to direct and identify arguments that justify the gap that needs to be filled. The literature needs to be directed and focused on the objectives of the study.

Therefore, authors need to state their research questions clearly and, for this reason, only a part of the studies that need to be accessed by the researcher can be included in the article. In the article of Combs et al. (2011) that was used as an example, the focus was on leveraging strategic resources and expansion strategies. This specificity of content provides readers and reviewers with a clear understanding. The literature review should provide a definition of the few constructs that serve as a basis for the article. For instance, it helps to clarify the constructs in relation to possible alternatives or definitions that may be inconsistent. The exception is when the work seeks to present the construct. For example, Hambrick and Finkelstein (1987) defined *managerial discretion*, which refers to the “latitude of action available to senior executives” (Hambrick & Finkelstein, 1987: 484). Later, Finkelstein and Hambrick (1990) went straight to the conceptual model and hypothesis, using managerial discretion as a moderator of the relationship between the length of an executive’s mandate and results. Their arguments were based on the upper echelon theory proposed by Hambrick and Mason (1984).

Another common mistake, especially by less experienced researchers and students, occurs when the review focuses on results and is organized by author. In both cases, the common mistake is not focusing on the theory. This is known as “argument by citation” (Sparrowe & Mayer, 2011). This is one of the most common situations in the articles we receive. A

sentence normally begins with the reference, using the example given above: “Combs et al. (2011) argue that...”. With this type of construction, the idea will become fragmented, with each article presenting its individual results. Authors are expected to engage in a theoretical narrative that stems from previous studies, not on results or discoveries of each work in isolation. The review may be limited to citing what others have done before. This construction will not lead to ordered arguments presented logically (Staw & Sutton, 1995).

The choice of works on which research is to be based is an important one. This means selecting references. In addition to the connection between previously published works and the research question in a current work, reviewers and editors assess the list of references of articles to gauge their quality through the reputation of the periodicals in which they were published. The literature review means using past research, including seminal and fundamental articles and those that are relevant for narrowing down the research question. However, it is also necessary to include recent research, using recently published articles from relevant journals. This may appear to be something obvious, but it is not. If an article is prepared as it should be, improved by the authors and assessed by reviewers at conferences and later by a periodical, the most recent references may be three or four years old, and in some cases five to ten years old. It is important to update and include more recent references. In addition to recently published articles, many periodicals include references to articles that have been accepted but have yet to be published in a first online edition. The *Strategic Management Journal*, for instance, follows this practice (see [http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1002/\(ISSN\)1097-0266/accepted](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/journal/10.1002/(ISSN)1097-0266/accepted)). This is important because reviewers may assess ideas as being outdated, even when they are not.

If an article has been poorly written, its intentions may not have been made clear to the reviewers. It is not easy to write a literature review. The literature review is not a section that is structured like the methods section, and the writing depends on the talent and experience of the writer. Therefore, it is important to consider the roles of the co-authors from the viewpoint of collaborators, i.e., the type of collaboration from each participant. One of the co-authors may be an experienced researcher with the required skills for academic writing. Another aspect to consider, for instance, is to consider whether the previous research will be relatively overlapped as a complement or contrast regarding different expectations. An example of a contrast, or counterpoint, is the article by Ferreira and Serra (2010), exploring the customer-supplier relationship through the perspectives of the TCT and RBV. Another example would be to group studies with the same results with others with different results, or even reconcile different theoretical approaches, as was the case of Levie and Lerner (2009), seeking to reconcile

the theory of agency with the RBV in the field of family businesses.

### 3 FINAL COMMENTS

In this editorial comment, which complements others on the traditional and accepted structure of academic articles, I addressed the literature review. First, I touched on the importance of the review, and how it serves as a link between the structure and content of an academic. Presenting the research gap is the basis for constructing the model and its hypotheses or propositions, in short its contribution to the field. Writing an academic article comes with practice and perseverance, but even so, there are some fundamental aspects that can guide authors and help them reduce the possibility of rejection or improve the quality of their submissions. Some of these aspects were presented in relation to the literature review to aid young researchers and students in the task of producing and publishing their academic research.

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