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Editorial

Expanding the Conversation through ‘Debate Essays’ and ‘Review Methodology’ Papers

Dermot Breslin and Katie Bailey

Review articles published in IJMR have gained an international reputation for the strength of their scholarly contribution, as evidenced by the growth in the journal’s two-year impact factor to 7.6 (Breslin *et al.* 2020). We continue to receive an increasing number of submissions to the journal, showing that ever more authors recognise the importance of reviews, and are engaged in writing review articles.

As Editors, a number of developments have emerged that have prompted us to consider ways of expanding the journal’s reach within the reviews field even further and, to address these, we are introducing two new rolling special sections to the journal; we warmly invite scholars to contribute to these.

‘Debate Essays’

The first section is intended to extend IJMR’s positioning as a review journal which seeks to develop theory in organization and management studies. A number of scholars have recently highlighted the important role played by literature reviews in developing knowledge, shaping new debates and shifting research directions (Hoon and Baluch 2019; Kunisch *et al.* 2018). Hoon and Baluch (2019) for example define theorizing from reviews as ‘activities of conceiving and constructing out of the phenomenal world – as represented in the review data – with extant theory to inform subsequent work’. Post *et al.* (2020) define a review paper as one which ‘analyses and synthesizes an existing body of literature by identifying, challenging, and advancing the building blocks of a theory through an examination of a body (or several

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bodies) of prior work’. IJMR has been leading in this area, publishing papers which ‘make significant conceptual contributions, offering a strategic platform for new directions in research, and making a difference to how scholars might conceptualise research in their respective fields’ (Gatrell and Breslin 2017, p.1).

The purpose of this new section is to provide a different format for authors to develop theory within the journal, and to continue conversations seeded by the publication of a review in IJMR. We have received a number of queries from potential authors who have read articles published in the journal, and would like the opportunity to respond to the arguments made, or present a different viewpoint. As Editors, we welcome the opportunity for the journal to provide a forum for theoretical debate and discussion around topics raised by authors. Accordingly, we are introducing a new ‘Debate Essays’ rolling special section. This section will allow authors to question, critique and challenge contributions made in published literature reviews, opening up conversations to wider audiences.

Readers who wish to respond to articles published in IJMR may submit a short debate essay of up to 5,000 words. Essays should only address articles published in IJMR within the previous three issues of the journal, or those that are currently within the Online Early section of the journal’s website. Authors of the original article published in IJMR will also be invited to respond and this response, if provided, will be published alongside the debate essay. The Editors will make the final decision over whether to accept debate essays for publication. We feel that this new section will enable and encourage authors to engage in a dialogue with one another to stimulate thinking and further advance theory.

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‘Review Methodology’ Papers

The second is a new section on literature review methodologies. Despite a growing number of journals publishing review articles, methodological advice on how to actually conduct a literature review, and especially a review which leads to the development of theory, is limited (Kunisch *et al.* 2018). IJMR has deliberately remained agnostic in terms of review methodology, embracing a wide variety of narrative and systematic approaches, including systematic literature reviews, meta-ethnography, meta-narrative, realist synthesis, meta-analysis and evidence synthesis, as well as the recent trend towards bibliometric analysis (Breslin *et al.* 2020; Post *et al.* 2020). Whilst most of the reviews published in IJMR have historically adopted a narrative approach (Hammersley 2001), the systematic literature review has been increasingly prevalent over the past decade (Jones and Gatrell 2014; Tranfield *et al.* 2003). The most important criterion for publication in IJMR is that the chosen approach needs to be robust and analytical, and enable the authors to develop a sound theoretical or conceptual contribution. Achieving the latter goal is seen as challenging with different types of review method. We have found for example, that papers which use a bibliometric co-citation approach tend to be over-descriptive in their analysis, and fail to step back from their findings to consider what the various trends discovered might mean for theory. Equally, whilst meta-analyses can integrate a wide range of findings from primary research arriving at strong conclusions regarding a particular relationship, their focus may overlook literature (i.e. not quantitative and empirical) which is critical to the development of theory within a field (Elsbach and van Knippenberg 2018). Both bibliometric and meta-analyses remain underrepresented in IJMR, and we would like to issue a reminder that both remain an important form of evidence review that can make a significant contribution to knowledge, and so we would also encourage authors to submit reviews which use different approaches to the journal.

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As the reviews field has expanded and the range of potential approaches has increased (Madden *et al.* 2018; Torraco 2016), our understanding of best practice in the conduct of reviews has not always kept pace. It is evident that some authors are not aware, for example, of how to develop appropriate criteria for the inclusion or exclusion of material from the review, and others are unsure how to link the review to the development of new theories and conceptual understandings. Furthermore, our understanding of how to advance theory through reviews is particularly limited (Hoon and Baluch 2019; Post *et al.* 2020), though this has received some recent attention. For example, Elsbach and van Knippenberg (2018) define integrative reviews as going beyond description, and adding conceptual value through new theoretical insights by integrating and/or critically assessing a body of knowledge. Alvesson and Sandberg (2020) challenge this view, instead arguing that reviews are a means to open up a field, challenge existing understandings and start new conversations as opposed to continuing existing ones. Hoon and Baluch (2019) argue that theorizing through reviews can occur via consolidative interrogation (consensus-confirming) and disruptive interrogation (consensus-challenging). Whereas the former focuses on similarities within a domain to clarify key constructs and relationships, the latter takes different points of view, opposing assumptions and conflicting stances to develop theory (Hoon and Baluch 2019). Post *et al.* (2020) further propose a number of approaches to developing theory through reviews including exposing emerging perspectives, analysing assumptions, clarifying constructs, establishing boundary conditions, testing new theory, theorizing with systems theory, and theorising with mechanisms. As editors, we believe IJMR has a strong contribution to make in this emerging field, given the wide variety of approaches our authors have taken to develop theory through literature reviews.

To address this need for a better understanding of review methods, IJMR now welcomes articles that address methods in undertaking literature reviews. Submissions should make an

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original and innovative contribution to debates around how literature reviews may be performed, and seek to advance readers’ understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of new or established approaches. Articles may critique or challenge existing methodologies, or present novel and interesting perspectives on how the quality of literature reviews may be improved. Articles should not merely replicate points made in existing studies of literature review approaches, but instead seek to make an original contribution. It should be stressed that articles submitted to this new special section should focus on the conduct of reviews, and not on other aspects of methodology (e.g. empirical methods). We hope that this new section will provide a forum to advance our understanding of innovations and developments in enhancing the quality and rigour of literature reviews. Submissions should conform to the usual IJMR publication guidelines.

Over the past 20 years, IJMR has grown to become the leading global review journal in business and management. As we move into the new decade, we are adapting the way in which our authors can advance theory through reviews. We look forward to receiving submissions to these two new special sections, and developing our conversations in new directions.

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