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Innovative conceptual contributions – raising the game for theory-driven reviews

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With thanks to our Associate Editors

Introduction

IJMR already has a strong, international reputation as a theory-driven review journal. We have always been clear that we do not publish merely descriptive reviews, but rather require a conceptual or theoretical contribution that materially advances knowledge within the reviewed field. Past editorials have thus focused on the need to offer a ‘strategic platform’ (Breslin, et al., 2020: 4) for advancement of understanding and research in the chosen topic area, and the importance of rigorous methodology in supporting contributions of this nature (Fan et al., 2022). Building on our own ‘strategic platform’ for the role of literature reviews in advancing knowledge, we believe it is now time for *IJMR*, as an ambitious and aspirational journal, to ‘up its game’ again, by calling for more innovative conceptual contributions from its contributors. Thus, we are asking authors wanting to submit their reviews to the journal to go beyond the kind of contributions that synthesize, organise or map the field – which may be considered as incremental – and to strive for more innovative and truly conceptual contributions that genuinely change the readers’ perspective. It is the aim of this editorial to explain what we mean by an ‘innovative conceptual contribution’, and to give guidance on what this might look like in practice.

The mechanism we have chosen for achieving this is a ‘Desert Island Discs’ collection of recent papers published in *IJMR* which already exemplify what we are seeking. For readers who are not familiar with this reference, Desert Island Discs is a long-running UK Radio 4 programme (first broadcast in January 1942, and now running to over 3,200 weekly episodes) in which well-known people are asked to choose the eight pieces of music they would like to take with them if they were stranded on a desert island, and to narrate to the programme host why these tracks have meaning for them. In our own homage to this cultural favourite, we have asked each of our Associate Editors to choose two papers published in *IJMR* within the last five years, and tell us why they believe they make an innovative conceptual contribution. As an editorial team, including our newest Editor-in-Chief, Joaquin Alegre - who was previously an Associate Editor - we have used these selections to draw out some key characteristics of what, for us, constitutes an ‘innovative conceptual contribution’. We hope this initiative will inspire you to be even more ambitious for your own submissions to *IJMR* in the future.

A ‘Desert Island Discs’ collection of innovative contributions

Given the rich collection of papers suggested by our Associate Editors, it would be impossible to discuss them all in the space available. Instead, we have selected some of them to develop a cohesive narrative concerning what makes a strong conceptual contribution for a literature review paper, and how that has changed in recent years. The backdrop to these changes in what constitutes a contribution are the shifts in the academic and publishing environment in which the papers are written and presented for publication, and the need for *IJMR* as a journal to be responsive to the

increasing pressures that these changes represent. It is important to be clear that we are not suggesting the earlier papers were less strong than the later ones, rather that the terrain within which innovative contributions sit has required a shift to contributions of different types. The recent papers could not have happened without the strong foundations of those which preceded them, both in terms of establishing robust review methodologies and in systematising often disparate literatures as the point of departure for further work.

In selecting the papers discussed below, we have tried to include a mix of topics, review methods and contribution types, as well as reflecting the different interests and perspectives of our Associate Editors. As we draw the paper to a close, we include some of our own thoughts to look forward to what we think an 'innovative conceptual contribution' will look like in the years to come, and hence what we are looking for in papers submitted to *IJMR*. In exploring the contributions made by selected papers, and the future directions for contributions to *IJMR*, we draw upon considerations of theorising from literature reviews from both Breslin, et al.'s (2020) miner-pro prospector continuum and Post et al's (2019) non-exhaustive typology of theory development processes.

The miner-pro prospector continuum draws upon metaphors to describe the nature of literature review strategies (Breslin, et al., 2020). The continuum lends itself to an interrelated use of various approaches – digging deep into existing domains of study (miner) or striking out to find new domains (prospector). To that end, Breslin, et al. (2020) offer eight distinct points on the miner-pro prospector continuum: spotting conceptual gaps, organising and categorising literatures, problematising the literature, identifying and exposing contradictions, transferring theories across domains, developing analogies and metaphors across domains, blending and merging of literatures across domains, and setting out new narratives and conceptualisations. Similarly, the analytic forms of literature reviews proposed by Post et al (2019) are posited as being: exposing emerging perspectives, analysing assumptions, clarifying constructs, establishing boundary conditions, testing new theory, theorising with systems theory, and theorising with mechanisms. In reflecting upon the Desert Island Discs collection of innovative contributions offered by the Associate Editors of *IJMR*, we also add our own thoughts on the positioning of these various avenues for theorising in the evolution of theory-based literature reviews.

The Selections

Chronologically, our first selection is Linnenluecke's (2017) paper entitled 'Resilience in business and management research: A review of influential publications and research agenda', chosen by Associate Editors Jane Maley and Alex Newman. This paper undertook a systematic review of 339 papers, books and book chapters, and organised them into five research streams. It also identified the similarities and differences between these streams in terms of conceptualisations, definitions, theorisations and operationalisations, and the extent to which these differences had been explored. In putting this paper forward for consideration, Jane noted that it did an exemplary job of tracing the development of resilience as a field, and of isolating the gaps in knowledge, through a methodologically strong review process and a thorough analysis of the findings. These are both fundamental underpinnings of a conceptual contribution that we would expect to see today. Five years on from its publication, Jane describes the study as set to become the gold standard reference on business resilience, and states that 'it does so much more than synthesising a body of work; it sets new standards on levels of rigour and presents new conceptual insights to enable leaps forward in knowledge.' Alexander Newman, who also proposed this paper for inclusion, adds that, in addition to categorising the extant literature, Linnenluecke (2017) exposes emerging perspectives on resilience across different streams of research and develops an agenda for future research that integrates and expands on extant knowledge. For all these reasons, it stands as an exemplar of what

a solid, systematic literature review needed to achieve against the backdrop of increasing attention to the value of literature reviews as vehicles for theorising rather than merely descriptive collations. This paper reflects a miner orientation (Breslin, et al., 2020) which can also be seen as exposing emerging perspectives or clarifying constructs (Post, et al., 2019).

Our second selection, published one year later, is Franco-Santos and Otley's (2018) 'Reviewing and theorising the unintended consequences of performance management systems', chosen by Jennifer Cross. This paper presents a mixed method review of the literature and develops a typology to explain how and why unintended consequences occur in relation to performance management systems. By using a combination of systematic and eclectic techniques in the review methodology, the paper ensures underpinning rigour at the same time as allowing the authors to draw on their existing knowledge and expertise in pulling together a rich collection of sources. Based on the resultant findings, the authors identify the most salient unintended consequences explored in previous studies and theorise the resultant typology to identify the key assumptions that underpin the choice of control mechanism, with goal-alignment and goal-uncertainty emerging as key factors. They then go on to relate these factors to ideas deriving from agency theory and stewardship theory, thus adding useful theoretical lenses. In this way, the paper analyses assumptions and theorises with mechanisms (Post et al, 2019), as well as touching on 'establishing boundary conditions.' As such, it is viewed by Jennifer as an exemplar in the field. She notes that 'in addition to the overall quality of the theory-building effort, key features that make this paper an exemplar include its transparency of methods (e.g., efforts to make the cognitive theory-development process explicit) and its willingness to embrace the complexity of its subject without the urge to over-simplify (e.g., combining eclectic and systematic review; drawing on theory from multiple academic disciplines; carefully noting limitations throughout). Consistent with a miner approach to literature reviews, this selection engaged underlying theory to reveal contradictions in the literature.

Associate Editor Somnath Lahiri chose Calabrò et al's (2019) paper, entitled 'Innovation in family firms: A systematic literature review and guidance for future research' for inclusion, and we agreed. This is an integrative literature review that offers a theoretical bridge between two disciplines, aligning it with a prospector approach (Breslin, et al., 2020) of transferring theories across domains. As such, it reflects an early response to the expansion of the journal's scope and remit – presaged in Gatrell and Breslin's (2017) editorial – to require a novel conceptual contribution from all published papers. In turn, this raising of the bar reflects the increased competition amongst top-flight journals and the need for *IJMR* to increase the 'value add' of its papers to keep pace. The application of an integrative approach to the review (albeit still underpinned by a systematic literature review methodology) also sits well with *IJMR*'s 'ecumenical' approach to review methodologies, as later captured in the 2022 editorial by Fan et al. In the current context, the integrative approach allows for the bridging of mainstream innovation literature with the more limited understanding of innovation in family firms. Drawing on mainstream theories of innovation, the paper thus offers a 'critical and dynamic picture of family-specific determinants of innovation [that] is intended to advance the debate on innovation in general, and family firms in particular' (2019: 317). Somnath notes how effectively the authors utilise tables, deeply anchored in the surrounding critical discussion, to 'provide a theoretical logic for the examined relationships' and to allow the reader to readily connect each study with a particular theory.'

Associate Editor Ignacio Requejo proposes 'Motivations for environmental alliances: Generating and internalising environmental and knowledge value' by Niesten and Jolink (2020). This is an outstanding exemplar of a literature review that examines a specific issue - motivations for adopting an environmental alliance - through the lens of different influential theoretical perspectives within

the management discipline. The authors found that environmental alliance partners 'collaborate to reduce costs or enhance competitive advantage, reputation or legitimacy to internalise external value'. Ignacio states 'given the traditional focus on economic value creation in previous strategy literature, the article pays closer attention to the motivations to either generate or internalise environmental and knowledge value'. By doing so the paper broadens the scope of the resource-based view, resource-dependence view, institutional theory and transaction cost economics when they are applied in the context of environmental alliances. In terms of Post et al's (2019) typology, this paper generates theory by exposing an emerging perspective for scrutinising the motivations for environmental alliances. As a prospector (Breslin, et al., 2020) piece, it makes its contribution through blending and merging literatures across different research domains.

Associate Editor David Fan recommends 'Absolute autonomy, respectful recognition, and derived dignity: Towards a typology of meaningful work' by Laaser and Bolton (2022). This is an excellent exemplar of a literature review deriving from a rigorous theoretically-informed model. Adopting a wide multidisciplinary approach, the authors examine the meaningful work (MW) literature in the fields of management and organisational behaviour, political philosophy, humanities, and sociology. David underscores that this paper 'develops a typology of MW for low-skilled work that rests on the interdependent conceptual dimensions of core autonomy, respectful recognition, and derived dignity'. Laaser and Bolton (2022) integrate different disciplines to better understand meaningful low-skilled work by developing these three interdependent conceptual dimensions through a causal complexity perspective. In terms of Post et al's (2019) typology, this paper generates theory by clarifying constructs to discern meaningful work in the context of low-skilled activities. In Breslin, et al.'s (2020) terms, the prospector approach is utilised to transfer theories across domains.

Associate Editor Jonathan Pinto highlights the paper 'The identity of entrepreneurs: Providing conceptual clarity and future directions' by Wagenschwanz (2022). This is a remarkable literature review, rigorously implemented through Tranfield et al.'s (2003) procedure, that clarifies the 'theoretical and terminological inconsistencies that have hampered the development of a coherent understanding of the identity of entrepreneurs.' Developed from a bibliometric point of departure, it effectively illustrates the 'value add' – over and above the bibliometric review itself – that we are seeking at *IJMR* through the development of a theoretical process model. Jonathan commends the author for providing a clear 'visual depiction of the structure of work and non-work identity of entrepreneurs' and a precise overview of 'the distinction and relationship between entrepreneurial identity, founder identity and founder's identity'. By doing so, Wagenschwanz (2022) puts forward a clear and useful framework that includes different levels of analysis. Following Post and colleagues (2019), this paper creates theory by clarifying constructs to better understand and analyse the identities of entrepreneurs in future research initiatives. Whilst Breslin, et al. (2020) don't really have an equivalent of 'clarifying constructs' this is still definitely at the prospector end of the spectrum as it makes its contribution by setting out new narratives and conceptualisations.

The next selection is 'Elite philanthropy in the United States and United Kingdom in the new age of inequities' written by MacLean, Harvey, Yang, and Mueller (2021) and recommended by Mairi MacLean. This provocative paper was published as part of a Special Issue on philanthropy and created a stir on Twitter and the news media, thus boosting the citations and impact for the Special Issue as a whole. Mairi notes that philanthropy is not a well-researched topic in the field of management and, as a result, 'there are fewer giants on whose shoulders to stand', which can make crafting a conceptual contribution challenging. Nevertheless, this review slayed giants by pointing out that elite philanthropy is more likely to maintain the power of elites and reinforce inequalities. The authors used Bourdieu's conception of power as a theoretical lens for conducting the review,

which adopted Breslin and Gattrell's (2020) prospector approach to selecting studies for inclusion. The paper offers a typology of where and how elite philanthropy occurs, but its claim to be a strong contribution rests on going beyond simply articulating a categorisation. The use of the theoretical mechanism to analyse the literature enabled the authors to provide greater nuance for how the classification typology contributed to understanding the operation of the phenomenon of elite philanthropy. This is consistent with theorising with mechanisms to show underlying influences of a social phenomenon (Post, et al., 2019).

Now-Co-Editor in Chief Joaquin Alegre recommended the paper 'Generativity: A systematic review and conceptual framework' by Thomas and Tee (2022) as an exemplary review. This paper incorporates a rigorous mixed methods approach to conducting the review, capitalising on co-citation analysis to broaden the pool of relevant articles and identify theoretical influences. It employs bibliometric analysis to map the field, supplemented by qualitative analysis to construct a more nuanced understanding of the concept of generativity. Importantly for a submission to *IJMR*, this article shows how to go beyond bibliometrics to offer a conceptual contribution. Joaquin observed, 'adopting a systems' approach, the authors clarify the 'generativity' process that happens when an organisation tries to innovate'. The review produces not only a categorisation of antecedents, sub-processes, and outcomes, but it contributes to the literature by creating a conceptual framework of how and where generativity influences innovation in organisations. In this way, the paper reflects Post et al.'s (2019) theorising with systems theory approach and Breslin, et al.'s (2020) setting out new conceptualisations.

Finally, Associate Editor Tom Baker selected 'A (re)view of the philosophical foundations of strategic management' by Rabetino, Kohtamaki, and Federico (2021). This article reviews forty years' worth of strategic management literature to identify and problematise the paradigmatic influences that have driven the field. The authors used a multi-stage method to rigorously identify the 300 articles that comprised their review, incorporating co-citation and content analysis. Tom commended the authors for their 'wonderful job explaining the approach they took in conducting the review, thus providing the reader with confidence that the papers to be included ... are ones that should be and not simply those that help advance a preconceived idea of the direction the review should go'. By exposing both the meta-theoretical assumptions and the basic paradigmatic assumptions taken within the strategic management literature, the authors offer a roadmap for multidisciplinary scholars to identify strategic management frameworks that enable them to work together, or at least understand one another. The authors thus contribute to the conversation of strategic management by identifying the underlying assumptions that have historically driven the field, how these assumptions have shifted, and how to progress the field using that meta-theoretical knowledge. This approach is consistent with Post et al.'s (2019) generation of theory by analysing the underlying assumptions of a body of literature. Whilst it doesn't align directly with Breslin, et al.'s (2020) points on the minor-prospector continuum, it can perhaps be seen as problematising the literature or identifying and exposing contradictions. As such, it somewhat bucks the trend, evident in the previous papers discussed above, of the need to shift further towards the prospector end of the spectrum to make an innovative contribution in many management fields.

So what does an innovative conceptual contribution look like?

In the past several years, *IJMR* has shifted from welcoming a broad spectrum of miner-to-prospector reviews to encouraging authors to submit reviews that take more of a prospector approach. The Desert Island Discs selections presented here broadly show this transition from the earlier outstanding miner-oriented reviews to the more recent prospector-oriented reviews. The recent editorials from *IJMR* have highlighted this new strategic direction for the journal (Breslin, et al.,

2021; Fan, et al., 2022). Rather than the incremental contributions that emerge from well written miner reviews – important as they are as a foundation for further work - we now seek more innovative contributions put forth through approaches more consistent with prospector approach. This is not in any way to suggest that the more recent contributions are somehow ‘better’ than the earlier ones – rather that they reflect the changing terrain in which we are all trying to add value through our work.

So, pulling together our thoughts on what the Desert Island Discs process revealed, what can we now say about the kinds of innovative conceptual contributions we are looking for in submissions to the journal? The first thing to say here, is that we don’t want to be prescriptive – to do so would be to destroy all potential for innovation. But we do want to distil some ideas from the proceeding discussion – and our own perceptions of the 500+ manuscripts we see each year – to suggest some places where innovation might be found, and what such a contribution needs to look like now and in the future.

The bedrock of a strong *IJMR* submission remains the proposal of a significant conceptual or theoretical development. For us, a conceptual contribution – literally – give the reader a new conception or understanding of the topic area under review – which may be in the form of a metaphor or analogy, whilst a theoretical contribution is specifically concerned with a theory-based explanation of a given phenomenon. We are open to both approaches, but the end result should represent a clear way of moving the field forward – previously referred to as a ‘strategic platform’ (Breslin, et al., 2020: 4). Management research has sometimes suffered from conceptual overlaps and contradictions, resulting in conceptual confusion within the academic community and beyond. A sound review can provide a clear account of these overlaps and contradictions, and offer conceptual developments that resolve or explain them in a manner that could serve as a widely accepted reference for future studies. Such developments could include an integrative definition, a typology, or a framework including the concept’s dimensions, as well as its connections to other issues such as its antecedents and consequences. Alternatively, a meticulous literature review might look at the theoretical perspectives that have been used when examining a particular topic. Such perspectives might be complementary or antagonistic, might be based in different assumptions, might have a different scope, or might fit one specific context better than another. After a thorough literature review, authors are in an excellent position to integrate, synthesise, compare and analyse previous theoretical perspectives connected to a particular topic, and to provide useful new theoretical developments for the academic community.

With this platform taken as a given, what other tips might we offer for pushing the conceptual/theoretical boundaries? Here are some thoughts.

Tips for pushing boundaries

Domain maturity is likely to play a significant role in determining the kind of contribution required to count as innovative. The more mature – and well-mined – the topic, the more likely it is that new contributions will require a degree of prospecting. This could take the form of integrative reviews across domains; the importation of out-of-domain theories or lenses, or a completely original analogy or metaphor to reshape or advance our understanding. Domain maturity can also be expected to play a role in choosing the appropriate review methodology needed to generate these various insights.

Graphics that emerge from the review are often powerful ways to demonstrate a contribution. However, it is important that these visual representations of the review go beyond static categories.

The graphics that show relationships and trajectories lend themselves toward more innovative contributions. To be exemplary, the use of graphics needs to include not only dynamic process models, but a narrative that supports and explains the development and nature of the interconnections that emerged from the review.

Bibliometric and co-citation analyses are welcome additions to the breadth of review methods published in *IJMR*. Frequently, however, submissions using these approaches present data from the initial analyses without linking this rich information back into a review of the literature. This creates a descriptive review that, by its nature, does not lend itself to a conceptual or theoretical contribution. We encourage authors to consider the descriptive bibliometric and co-citation data—for example, author countries of origin, publication outlets of articles in the review, chronology of publications—as a starting point for reflecting on how those data inform new insights before incorporating them into the review. The process of incorporating data from these analytic approaches into a review with an innovative conceptual contribution typically means engaging with other forms of review processes that emphasise an engagement with the text of the reviewed articles. The power of these newer analytic approaches to reviews, coupled with the richness of more narrative approaches, can result in insightful theoretical and conceptual contributions.

Another way to generate a conceptual contribution that pushes the boundaries of innovation is to use a theoretical lens to inform your review. Three of the Desert Island Discs selections did this, each in a different way. One, the selection by Thomas and Tee (2022), incorporates bibliometric analysis with a qualitative review of the generativity literature through a theoretical lens of systems theory to provide depth and nuance to the otherwise descriptive data from the bibliometrics. The selection by MacLean et al. (2021) uses Bourdieu as a theoretical lens to expose power dynamics to develop a classification typology for elite philanthropy and articulate how that typology revealed operating mechanisms within the sector. Finally, Rabetino et al. (2021) engaged in a meta-theoretical approach that set out new narratives for strategic management based upon how the underlying assumptions of the field have shifted over time. These are not the only ways in which a theoretical lens might add value, but hopefully they suggest some ideas for this type of approach.

Finally, we would suggest that author creativity – underpinned by a rigorous methodology – will be important in pushing beyond the obvious ‘gap filling’ type of contribution to generate something truly new. The aim here is not just to submit a manuscript that tells us something we didn’t know before, but to submit one that makes us - and our readers - really excited to know more! Good ways to achieve this ‘quantum leap’ contribution could include collaborating with new colleagues, drawing on unfamiliar research paradigms or theoretical lenses, or looking across research domains for informative parallels.

Whilst by no means exhaustive, we hope these suggestions will offer a launch pad of ideas for thinking about your own approach to generating an innovative conceptual contribution through the literature review process.

Conclusion

The reviews selected by the Associate Editors, who work closely with authors to craft polished manuscripts with substantive contributions, show the wide range of what a solid contribution can look like. Recent editorials set the foundation for this new strategic direction of the journal to move beyond incremental contributions towards more ground-breaking or radical theoretical or conceptual contributions. While each Desert Island Discs programme ends with a single selection, we are not selecting just one exemplar to close this editorial. Our aim is rather to inspire authors to

be bold and develop something genuinely creative in any one of a number of different ways, and to suggest some of the possibilities for what a creative and innovative contribution can look like. We look forward to seeing your submissions!

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