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Editorial

A Critical Look at the Practice of Literature Review

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Um Olhar Crítico sobre a Prática de Revisão de Literatura

Marcelo de Souza Bispo*[1,2]

ABSTRACT

Despite the advantages of literature review and the abundance of texts that discuss it, there is still a gap in critical reflection on its methodologies and uses. My goal in this editorial is to reflect on the practice of literature review in the administration field from a critical perspective. The literature review I am referring to is not just a set of techniques for conducting it; it is a collective doing among scholars, producing specific knowledge. By drawing on concepts such as fad, methodologism, and decolonial critique, we can conclude that contrary to the common belief among researchers, following rigid protocols in literature review does not necessarily lead to new knowledge. Instead, it reproduces pre-existing ways of thinking about a topic, which can inhibit reflective and critical thinking about research findings.

Keywords: literature review; review articles; metodologism; social practice; decolonialism.

RESUMO

Apesar das evidentes vantagens da revisão de literatura e dos muitos textos que tratam sobre o tema, ainda faltam reflexões críticas sobre as formas de fazê-la e os seus usos. O meu objetivo neste editorial é apresentar uma reflexão crítica sobre a prática da revisão de literatura no campo científico da administração. A revisão de literatura de que estou tratando aqui não se resume apenas a um conjunto de técnicas de como fazê-la, mas ao que implica esse fazer coletivo entre acadêmicos que leva ao surgimento de um conhecimento próprio que envolve a sua prática. A partir das noções de modismo, metodologismo e uma crítica decolonial, é possível concluir que ao contrário do que muitos pesquisadores dizem, fazer revisão de literatura sob protocolos muitos rígidos, ao invés de oportunizar novos conhecimentos, termina reproduzindo modos de pensar sobre um determinado tema e inibe o pensamento reflexivo e crítico sobre os achados da pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: revisão de literatura; artigos de revisão; metodologismo; prática social; decolonialismo.

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INTRODUCTION

The literature review is an integral part of scientific research. In recent years, numerous methods for conducting a literature review have emerged, and a considerable number of studies highlight its importance and methodology (Cooper, 1988; Elsbach & Knippenberg, 2020; Fan et al., 2022; Ogbonnaya & Brown, 2023; Paul & Criado, 2020; Post et al., 2020; Wong, 2015). However, a dearth of texts still seek to reflect on and debate the "practice" of the literature review. The term 'practice' here refers to a collective knowledgeable doing that involves arrangements (from the French 'agencement') between humans (scholars) and non-humans (articles, spreadsheets, internet, computers, software, rankings, journals, etc.) (Gherardi, 2019). Therefore, the literature review that I am addressing here is not just a set of techniques but the implications of this practice as a collective action among scholars, leading to the emergence of specific knowledge that involves the literature review. The literature review is part of a texture of other academic and scientific practices such as student guidance, research, and publication. My perspective is oriented toward viewing the literature review as a social phenomenon (a practice), and the objective of this editorial is to present a critical reflection on this phenomenon in the scientific field of administration.

The number of scientific articles presented in a literature review format is on the rise (Vogel et al., 2017). This trend is linked to a significant increase in the number of scientific publications, technological advancements that enable the mapping of scientific production through various search engines and databases, and the understanding that the results of a literature review on a specific topic can be presented as a scientific article. A literature review can synthesize previous work, compare its findings, highlight relevant gaps and puzzles, challenge and extend existing theory, and propose new questions and directions for future research. The approach to conducting a literature review varies according to the objectives set for the research (Cooper, 1988; Fan et al., 2022; Ogbonnaya & Brown, 2023; Paul & Criado, 2020; Post et al., 2020; Wong, 2015). These various literature review methods lead to classifications such as narrative, systematic, integrative, meta-analytic, conceptual, historical, and critical reviews (Fan et al., 2022; Ogbonnaya & Brown, 2023).

Despite the advantages of literature review and the numerous studies that address the topic, there remains a significant lack of critical reflection on its methodology and applications (e.g., Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020). This includes considering the literature review not only in terms of its potential technicalities but also based on the denaturalization of the "scientific" rules and norms that guide and control this practice. For instance, the predominance of the English language as the official medium of scientific communication and the implications of this for academics from peripheral countries (Barros & Alcadipani, 2023), particularly those from the Global South. My reflection is divided into three topics: fads, methodologism, and (de)colonial aspects that involve the literature review. I do not aim to exhaust the critical debate on the phenomenon with these three points. The choice was made based on what most caught my attention, considering my experience as a researcher, author, reviewer, and editor. On the other hand, I believe these topics are relevant to highlight aspects that often go unnoticed or are neglected by scholars (especially peripheral ones) when discussing the practice of literature review. These reflections also guide those who intend to submit a literature review to RAC, a Brazilian journal with global communication and collaboration.

Fad

One aspect I find problematic in literature reviews is when academics make it the main genre (in terms of the number of publications) of their scientific articles. This may not be apparent to those unfamiliar with the Brazilian context or other countries where scientific production is concentrated in graduate programs (masters and PhDs). Professors advise many students in these programs, and each advising process usually leads to a literature review that can potentially become an article. The issue is not with conducting literature reviews per se but with neglecting the production of other types of scientific articles that demonstrate the researcher's capacity for empirical investigation beyond what already exists in the literature. Consequently, two problems emerge.

The first issue is that the desire to transform a literature review into an article is tied to the pressure to publish, both for students (to complete their programs and enter the system) and for professors (to remain in the system). This phenomenon is known as 'publish or perish' (Machado & Bianchetti, 2011; Rond & Miller, 2005; Silva, 2019). Gherardi et al. (2023) introduce the concept of "academic affective athleticism" to say how the "academy in my flesh" is directly related to publishing, encapsulated in the phrase "I publish, therefore I am"(p. 180). They emphasize the idea that academic bodies are molded by specific practices that discipline self-management in academic practice. Publishing is one of these embodied practices, as articles (especially those published in more prestigious journals) represent the primary artifact by which many researchers gain academic recognition. In this context, many researchers view the

publication of literature reviews as a means to achieve their academic objectives.

On the other hand, many potential authors of literature reviews overlook the fact that many people conduct reviews on the same topic using similar methodologies, leading to similar results. This makes the review a mapping of a specific scientific field without significant discoveries. Although the findings of literature reviews are important for researchers to understand the field of study (Ogbonnaya & Brown, 2023; Patriotta, 2020), it is crucial not to lose sight of the fact that for many others, these findings are already well-known because they have been researching in the field for a longer period. Instead of focusing on understanding the field of study in depth from a critical qualitative perspective, the findings are often treated quantitatively and descriptively, which adds little to the field. This type of descriptive literature review is highly perishable due to the rapid pace of scientific production, and it quickly becomes obsolete to the point of not deserving space in a journal. It is necessary to distinguish between the need for a literature review as a relevant stage of any scientific research (Fan et al., 2022; Ogbonnaya & Brown, 2023; Paul & Criado, 2020; Post et al., 2020) and literature reviews that actually have the potential to offer new knowledge based on a careful or even critical analysis of the findings to become a relevant scientific article (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020; Patriotta, 2020).

The second problem is that most literature reviews do not deliver what is expected of them: to encourage critical reflection on existing knowledge in a field, broaden and deepen understanding of a given topic, highlight implications for theory and practice, and suggest new research agendas (Patriotta, 2020). Often, literature reviews are limited to describing what has already been produced in a field of study without addressing the recurring question in scientific circles: 'So what?' As Ogbonnaya and Brown (2023) state, "Generally, editors and reviewers place a greater premium on the theoretical [practical and social] contribution of a manuscript above merely describing the available evidence on a topic." (p. 369). Some academics do not understand that the expectations around a literature review article go beyond the stage of an investigation where one maps the literature regarding a given topic in order to support new research agendas. Thus, they end up focusing on developing descriptive articles on a field of study instead of delving into the literature review findings to truly advance the research and make a relevant contribution. Specifically, it is necessary to view the findings of a literature review as any other empirical data obtained through surveys, interviews, observations, or databases.

Methodologism

Another aspect of the literature review that draws my attention is the multitude of existing methodological possibilities. The variations in how to conduct a literature review and its typologies lead many researchers to overspecialize the topic. An example of what I am referring to is the creation of protocols like PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) (Moher et al., 2009) in administration research. Although I recognize that the various fields of knowledge have specificities that require different forms of knowledge production, making PRISMA relevant in the field of medicine, some of these protocols end up being used more for rigidity than scientific rigor in the administration field. It is a fantasy in the quest to make certain procedures appear scientific, especially when they are presented in a step-by-step manner and suggest some type of complexity in their performance. The supposed 'comfort' of a research protocol that often suggests scientific rigor can end up making the researcher a prisoner in a cage in which the method ends up being the end and not the means of carrying out the research. This is what Bell et al. (2017) refer to as 'Methodology-as-Technique.'

When the literature review becomes an end in itself in the research process, it can be classified as a methodologism. In fact, the field of administration is replete with methodologies in which the methodological protocols of research manuals seem to reverse the order of things, with the researcher becoming controlled by the methods. Boschetti (2015) offers a critical reflection on what characterizes methodologism, highlighting how values and epistemes influence the practice of science.

> "Methodologism resurfaces in the form of an emphasis on technicality and positivist legalism as crucial in training and research, to the detriment of questioning, criticism, and grand politics as fundamental elements of critical thinking. The assumption is reinforced that a good technique, or an arsenal of techniques, can replace critical analysis and collective political action in transforming reality. This gives rise to theoretical-methodological elaborations guided by conservative, prescriptive, or descriptive approaches, emphasizing empiricism and degrading critical thinking and intervention committed to collective transformation" (p. 647).

Methodologism in the literature review practice represents the discourse of scientific neutrality that crystallizes through the normalization of taken-for-granted methodological processes. These are presented to the scientific community (especially those in training) as "this is the way to do it" (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2020, p. 1291).

Within the methodology domain, there is no room for creativity and criticism, and theorization becomes difficult due to the rigidity of the protocols. One way to highlight this methodological determinism in literature reviews is through the words of Alvesson and Sandberg (2020):

> "We suggest that careful attention is called for by themes of labelling and ordering research domains, knowledge accumulation ideals, vacuum cleaning large sets of literatures, reliance on oversimplifying sorting and ordering signs, author neutrality and the possible privileging of integration at the expense of recognizing variation. We do not want to overemphasize criticisms of review articles, but we do think that any way of seeking to develop knowledge through them requires critical reflection on their potential shortcomings". (p. 1296)

Methodologism in literature reviews also has implications for theses and dissertations committees and in peer review processes. I have encountered situations (as a committee member and as an editor) in which students and authors are asked to conduct literature reviews according to protocol "X" because the committee member or the reviewer understood that the method presented was not "robust" enough. In all these cases, I realized that the "robustness" required was just a nicety that would not add anything relevant to the research under evaluation. It was not about a concrete flaw in mapping what was produced on the topic addressed in the article, thesis, or dissertation in terms of content (and not in the number of identified articles).

I am not against any type of literature review. My defense is that if there are multiple possibilities for carrying out literature reviews with different objectives, researchers should have their choices respected to conduct their research in the way they understand to be most coherent and aligned with the scope of the designed research project. It is necessary to remember that any literature review protocol cannot map all existing production on a given subject. This becomes evident when authors choose criteria for research selections. One of them (which is not always explicit in the methodological description) is only to use texts written in English and the native language for non-native English speakers. A common justification for this choice is that the 'best' productions were made or are available in English. Does any serious scientist believe having quality productions in languages other than English is impossible?

Some may still say that only quality work is published in journals available in internationally prestigious indexers due to the rigidity they use to accept journals in their databases, which would not imply (in theory) publication in English. This is true, but isn't it possible to have quality publications in journals that are not in these indexes? What about preprints that are not usually included in the literature review selection criteria but are available and, in many cases, have more views and citations than articles published in prestigious journals? These questions aim to draw attention to the fact that "perfect mappings" of literature are utopian, and the complexity of the process is often greater than the gains in knowledge on a given topic for conducting good scientific research. It is necessary to highlight that many of the beliefs about the literature review carry not only methodologisms but colonial aspects of knowledge production (Alcadipani & Rosa, 2011; Abdalla & Faria, 2017; Abreu-Pederzini & Suarez-Barraza, 2020; Boussebaa & Tienari, 2019).

(De)colonial aspects

The final point I want to address about the literature review involves its decolonial aspects. Particularly in the field of administration, where the literature considered "cutting edge" is produced in English and published in journals based in the Global North, there are both political (yes, political!) and technical aspects to be debated. Evidence that the debate on the literature review has political contours can be seen in a statement by Amon Barros and Rafael Alcadipani in a text recently published in the *Management Learning* journal.

> "Drawing from our experience as Brazilian academics, we argue that publishing in top-MOS academic journals demands more than mastering language and style. Academics closer to the margins and willing or pushed to publish in "international" journals engage in a colonial encounter. They also need to perform a double-translation, writing ideas in another language and for another audience. All this is not cost-free, and writing is entangled with thinking. Periphery-based academics need to adapt both, facing objective and subjective costs. Getting a paper accepted is not a mere question of mastering words" (Barros & Alcadipani, 2023, p. 577).

This statement reflects the sentiments of many academics worldwide (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Horn, 2017; Rosa & Alves, 2011). The political aspect reflected in the literature review is subtle. It lies in the barrier that language imposes on the production of scientific knowledge (Barros & Alcadipani, 2023; Boussebaa & Tienari, 2019). Anyone fluent in a second language knows that language involves more than words and grammatical rules; it represents ways of living and thinking (Chanlat, 2014). However, language is just evidence of dominant ways of thinking and doing science.

Language carries with it a doxa that subtly imposes rules in scientific practice. Doxa represents underlying beliefs generally taken for granted by everyone in certain

groups (Abreu-Pederzini & Suarez-Barraza, 2020). In the specific case of the literature review, the belief in the existence of a science in which technique is devoid of values and preferences (Bell et al., 2017) leads to statements such as:

> "The most important criterion for publication in IJMRis [*International Journal of Management Reviews*] that the manuscript offers a sound theoretical or conceptual contribution. In order to do this, the methodological approach needs to be robust and analytical; **demonstrating a robust and analytical approach keeps pushing us to think of best practices** in order to undertake a literature review professionally" (Fan et al., 2022, p. 171).

A quick glance at this passage might suggest it merely states what is widely recognized in the field of administration and science in general. However, a closer examination reveals how the imposition of ideas, values, and epistemes is present in seemingly 'neutral' techniques. I am referring to the term 'best practices,' which is very common in the field of administration, but it conceals a significant problem that can be highlighted by the following questions: Who determines what constitutes best practice? For whom are they best? In the case of literature reviews, "best practices" may represent a form of methodology. The idea that there are 'best practices' is an effective way to create what Michel Foucault (1987) termed 'docile bodies,' which becomes naturalized in the 'academy in my flesh' (Gherardi et al., 2023). For 'best practices' to be consolidated, some type of mechanism is necessary to legitimize these practices, which is where rankings come into play (Wedlin, 2011).

Rankings are created with the justification of enabling comparisons within standardized criteria (Vogel et al., 2017; Wedlin, 2011). However, the 'quality' criteria are determined by those who have power over the rankings, leading to control over their results and functioning.Vogel et al. (2017) conducted research with a large sample on how journal rankings work. The authors discovered that most articles published in journals considered cutting-edge in administration were by Anglo-Saxon authors and institutions and that quantitative methods are predominant with a large database and a positivist bias. Do these findings correspond to Anglo-Saxon intellectual superiority? Is the predominance of the English language just a coincidence? Although there is a movement to increase diversity in the most prestigious journals in the field of administration, this diversity has not yet fully reached the command of these journals. This diversity needs to go beyond race, gender, location, and type of institution, reaching epistemological, theoretical, and methodological issues. Reviewing literature with epistemic respect (Krlev & Spicer, 2023) is key, considering a decolonial view on the topic. This involves literature reviews that may reveal texts from different journals and rankings, prestigious databases, or even the English language as the primary search criteria. Reviews about specific contexts need to look at where this specificity is produced. Otherwise, the research agenda will continue to be determined by an elite that legitimizes itself by reinforcing dominant thoughts legitimized by rankings.

Artificial intelligence can contribute (although there are some steps to go forward) to the democratization of scientific production and help expand searches for texts in literature reviews. It is possible that, at some point, it will produce high-quality translations to the point where we can write our own texts and read others' texts in our mother tongues. A great barrier would be broken. Imagine opening an issue of any journal and finding texts published in Portuguese, Spanish, French, German, Mandarin, Serbian, and Arabic and being able to read them all in your native language? We await this technology.

FINAL REMARKS

My objective in this text was not to produce another literature review protocol. My motivation was to offer a critical look at how literature reviews are conducted, thinking less about what it is (ontology) and more about how it is done (practice). This allowed the opportunity to show how the literature review has become a fad among many academics and that the way of doing it is very much anchored in a methodologism that ends up being a cage in exploring existing literature on a given topic. It is important to have this understanding because, contrary to what many researchers say, carrying out a literature review under very strict protocols, instead of providing new knowledge, reproduces ways of thinking about a given topic. Reviews end up being more of a hypothesis test (with a high probability of confirmation) than a truly exploratory, reflective, and critical journey. In this sense, I share the words of Alvesson and Sandberg (2020):

> "While dominant understandings of reviews use images like the review author as construction worker or puzzle solver, we are more interested in their role as an artist, a detective, an innovator or even an anthropologist, supporting the innovative part of research" (p. 1302).

Literature reviews in RAC must seek this plural path to deliver original theories. The idea is that authors build knowledge considering their places and are concerned with how doing administration contributes to facing major societal challenges.

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