Narrative Literature Reviews in Scientific Research: Pros and Cons

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ABSTRACT

Narrative literature reviews play a crucial role in scientific research by providing a comprehensive overview of the available knowledge on a particular topic. Unlike systematic reviews, which follow rigid methodologies, narrative reviews offer a more flexible and qualitative approach, allowing researchers to synthesize and interpret the findings of different studies. This type of review is particularly valuable in fields with a high literature diversity, as it can help identify trends, gaps, and emerging themes. A key strength of narrative reviews is their ability to provide broader context, integrate insights from diverse disciplines, and enable a deeper understanding of complex issues. They also facilitate the exploration of theories and frameworks, often leading to new hypotheses and research questions. Narrative reviews are valuable resources for practitioners and policymakers, extracting key findings that can inform practice and decision-making. However, these reviews are not without limitations. The subjective nature of narrative synthesis can introduce bias, and the lack of a standardized methodology makes the reliability of conclusions uncertain. To enhance the rigor of narrative reviews, researchers should clearly define their objectives, thoroughly document their search strategies, and critically evaluate the quality of included studies. Although narrative literature reviews may not have the same empirical basis as systematic reviews, they remain a significant tool for knowledge dissemination and theoretical exploration in scientific research. On average, only a relatively small proportion of recent scientific publications provide high levels of evidence, though the journal review process should discourage unsubstantiated conclusions in original research articles. This introductory editorial is a brief preview that aims to help read, understand, and evaluate narrative review articles.

Keywords: Narrative review, knowledge, Scientific research, Literature, Pros, Cons.

INTRODUCTION

Although postgraduate students may have already written a few research papers, there are distinct differences in writing styles and research experiences across various fields of study. Therefore, one may expect that most beginners and even experienced researchers often find writing a review article challenging. Scientific review articles generally fall into four categories: narrative reviews, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and mixed studies reviews. Narrative reviews encompass a broad range of material and are typically not given priority for publication in many academic journals. In contrast, systematic reviews and meta-analyses are frequently accepted for publication because they are rigorously structured and focus on a defined research question (Myung, 2023; Amobonye et al., 2024).

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Narrative or traditional literature reviews are thorough, critical, and objective assessments of existing knowledge on specific topics. They play a vital role in the research process by establishing theoretical frameworks and providing context for research. These reviews help identify patterns and trends in the literature, discover gaps or inconsistencies in the existing knowledge base, generate well-insighted research questions, and justify further investigation. There are four common types of narrative literature reviews (Onwuegbuzie and Frels, 2016). Firstly, the general literature review provides an overview of the most significant aspects of knowledge on a current topic. This general literature review fits as an introduction to a thesis or dissertation with defined research objectives, the central hypothesis or problem, or the reviewer's/ examiner's argumentative thesis. Secondly, theoretical literature reviews examine how theory shapes or frames the research. Thirdly, methodological literature reviews describe research methods and design. These methodological reviews outline the strengths and weaknesses of the methodologies used and provide future direction. Fourthly, historical literature reviews scrutinize research throughout a certain period, often starting with the first time an issue, concept, theory, or phenomenon emerged in the literature and then tracing its evolution within the scholarship of a discipline. The purpose is to place research in a historical context to show familiarity with state-of-the-art developments and to identify the likely directions for future research.

This editorial is a concise preview for scientists, journal reviewers, researchers, graduate students, policy-, and decision-makers. It aims to provide valuable insights to help read, understand, and critically evaluate narrative review articles. By providing the necessary information and knowledge, the editorial seeks to enhance the ability to discern the quality and significance of research findings, ultimately contributing to informed decision-making and advancing scientific fields.

Pros and Cons of Narrative Reviews

Narrative reviews clarify and critically analyze specific topics or bodies of literature through interpretive synthesis, creativity, and expert judgment. This type of review is particularly effective in achieving these objectives (Amobonye et al., 2024). Narrative reviews can be broad or focused, often addressing a specific aspect or problem rather than adhering to a predetermined approach. They can also tackle novel, hypothesis-generating research questions. Additionally, narrative reviews may take the form of opinion pieces, such as editorials and viewpoints, as well as expert opinions in the form of letters or narrative overviews (Byrne, 2016).

It is important to note that the literature review section of most dissertations and empirical papers is typically narrative in style. Despite the challenges associated with publishability, narrative reviews can still be accepted for publication if the authors possess expert knowledge of the latest techniques. This expertise enables them to offer insightful and fresh interpretations of the selected works, conduct current research on a specific topic by relying on a substantial body of peer-reviewed articles, and provide interpretations that help achieve several goals: firstly, to derive general principles from existing literature, potentially expanding the scope of the research field, secondly, to clarify conceptual conflicts that may arise from the literature, and thirdly, to synthesize and incorporate all relevant studies connected to a particular model. Careful selection of articles is crucial to ensure comprehensive respect and coverage of the chosen topic.

In the mid-20th century, since general scientific journals began to include narrative, systematic, and meta-analytical literature reviews, the sometimes-heated debate over the advantages of narrative versus systematic and analytical reviews continued in many commentaries and editorials in the scientific literature (Byrne, 2016). Opinions tended to expand the concept of a literature review to include any article or publication that

intentionally summarizes relevant literature, either to provide comprehensive, new coverage of the entire subject or for the sake of a strategic perspective that paves the way for new research directions. In this regard, review manuscripts should accurately, comprehensively, translucently, and objectively summarize relevant literature. As the volume of published scientific literature has grown exponentially, review articles- traditional narrative reviews, modern critical reviews, systematic literature reviews, and meta-analyses have become increasingly important in helping those interested in the subject make sense of the ever-increasing volume of original research publications (Brignardello-Petersen *et al.,* 2024). Although narrative reviews are likely to be more comprehensive than other review types, they often face many criticisms for their potential bias due to selective citation and their lack of explicit methods, reproducibility, and rigor of systematic and analytical reviews. On average, only a relatively small proportion of recent scientific publications provide high levels of evidence. This trend raises concerns about the reliability and robustness of findings in various research fields. Although the journal review process is designed to scrutinize and validate research before publication, it does not always prevent the dissemination of unsubstantiated conclusions in original research articles. Consequently, scientists must exercise caution when interpreting results and consider the quality of evidence presented. Researchers must adhere to rigorous methodologies and ethical standards, ensuring their contributions advance knowledge based on sound, validated research practices.

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المراجعات الأدبية السردية في البحث العلمي: سلبيات وإيجابيات

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ملخص

تلعب المراجعات السردية دورًا محوريًا في البحث العلمي، إذ توفر نظرة شاملة على المعرفة المتاحة حول موضوع معين. وعلى عكس المراجعات المنهجية التي تتبع منهجيات صارمة، توفر المراجعات السردية نهجًا أكثر مرونة ونوعية، مما يسمح للباحثين بتجميع وتفسير نتائج الدراسات المختلفة. ويُعد هذا النوع من المراجعات قيّمًا بشكل خاص في المجالات ذات التنوع العلمي الكبير، إذ يُمكنه المساعدة في تحديد الاتجاهات والفجوات والمواضيع الناشئة. ومن أهم نقاط القوة في المراجعات السردية قدرتها على توفير سياق أوسع، ودمج رؤى من تخصصات متنوعة، وتمكين فهم أعمق للقضايا المعقدة. كما أنها تُسهّل استكشاف النظريات والأطر، مما يؤدي غالبًا إلى فرضيات وأسئلة بحثية جديدة. تُعدّ المراجعات السردية موارد قيّمة للممارسين وصانعي السياسات، إذ تُستخلص منها نتائج رئيسية تُثري الممارسة وصنع القرار. ومع ذلك، فإن هذه المراجعات ليست خالية من القيود. فالطبيعة الذاتية للتجميع السردي قد تُؤدي إلى تحيز، كما أن غياب منهجية موحدة يُضعف موثوقية الاستنتاجات. ولتعزيز دقة المراجعات السردية، ينبغي على الباحثين تحديد أهدافهم بوضوح، وتوثيق استراتيجيات بحثهم بدقة، وتقييم جودة الدراسات المشمولة بشكل نقدي. على الرغم من أن مراجعات الأدبيات السردية قد لا يكون لها نفس الأساس التجريبي مثل المراجعات المنهجية، إلا أنها تظلّ أداة مهمة لنشر المعرفة والاستكشاف النظري في البحث العلمي. وفي المتوسط، لا تقدم سوى نسبة صغيرة نسبيًا من المنشورات العلمية الحديثة مستويات عالية من الأدلة، على الرغم من أن عملية مراجعة المجلات العلمية ينبغي أن تثبط الاستنتاجات غير المدعومة بالأدلة في المقالات البحثية الأصلية. هذه المقدمة الافتتاحية التمهيدية هي معاينة موجزة تهدف إلى المساعدة في قراءة وفهم وتقييم مقالات المراجعة السردية.

الكلمات الدالة: المراجعة السردية، المعرفة، البحث العلمي، الأدبيات، السلبيات، الإيجابيات.

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