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Utilization and development of systematic reviews in management research: What do we know and where do we go from here?

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Abstract

Several years since the introduction of systematic review in management research, our paper takes stock of how the methodology has been used thus far to elicit potential areas for improvement and a future best practice agenda. It was our focus to investigate how synthesis methods have been approached and how implications are spelled out for future research, practice and, where relevant, policy. To address this, we conducted a systematic review of systematic reviews published in management research since the early 2000s ($N = 391$). We found that whilst scholars adopted similar methodological steps, there was variability in focus, with more attention paid to explaining the systematic review methodology protocol and search strategy utilized, than on detailed analysis and synthesis of the included studies' findings. These aspects should be addressed more explicitly from the outset as an integral aspect of a systematic review protocol to support more refined application of relevant synthesis methods to develop the field. We conclude with a guide for 'best practice', including recommendations and published examples where available and an agenda for future refinement.

1 | SYSTEMATIC REVIEW METHODOLOGY: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Systematic review methodology (SRm) articulates a replicable approach for collecting, analysing and synthesizing literature with clear audit trails about what is and what is not known regarding a research question or set of questions (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009, p. 671). Well established across medicine, healthcare, education and social policy, a systematic review (SR) is a habitual first step before collecting primary data due to a commitment to evidence-based practice. The methodology is often carried out by practitioners (Singh, 2017), such as medical consultants, or by decision-maker–researcher partnerships (e.g. Haynes & Wilczynksi, 2010; Roshanov et al. 2011). SRs continue to undergo extensive methodological developments in these disciplines, which are promoted by evidence collections or 'warehouses'. For instance, the Cochrane Library, which publishes a wide range of SRs relevant to health, promotes using the PICO approach (population, intervention, comparison, outcomes; see Singh, 2017 for further discussion, also Higgins et al. 2019). The Campbell Collaboration, which encompasses a range of topics including crime and justice and now produces a journal dedicated to SRs (*Journal of Systematic Reviews*), and the EPPI-Centre (Evidence for Policy and Practice Information Centre) also promote SRs for evidence-based policy-making and social interventions, providing a range of resources including specialized software, as well as publications to guide practitioners and researchers alike (e.g. Gough et al., 2017). There have also been other pragmatic developments to further enhance transparency and objectivity in research in general, such as the pre-registration of protocols (e.g. Center for Open Science), analogous to developments to pre-register experimental studies to safeguard against researchers changing research questions 'post hoc' to better fit with unexpected findings and promote the value of replication.

In comparison, discipline-specific methodological developments for SRs in management research appear less well established, given that SRs were applied in this domain from the early 2000s (e.g. Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Levy & Williams, 2004), the first published by Pittaway et al. (2004) in *International Journal of Management Reviews*. Since then, the use of SRm by scholars has increased across diverse topics such as total quality management (Aquilani et al., 2017), corporate social responsibility (Dienes et al., 2016), the 'always on culture' (Schlachter et al., 2018) and workforce diversity (Sourouklis & Tsagdis, 2013), amongst others.

SRs are a purported cornerstone of evidence-based management to 'assemble, analyze and interpret' (Rousseau et al., 2008, p. 477) available knowledge to improve both scholarly knowledge and management practice through a comprehensive review of available, relevant academic and practitioner knowledge (Sahoo et al., 2010; Vishanth et al., 2009). SRm's rigorous protocols address potential researcher bias common in traditional literature reviews to (a) justify the lenses through which the researcher is making an argument (Adams et al., 2017; Briner & Rousseau, 2011) and (b) provide understanding of the existing body of knowledge before deciding on future primary research (see Adams et al., 2017; Rojon et al., 2011; Tranfield et al., 2003).

Yet, not all management researchers have greeted SRm with enthusiasm. Cassell (2011) argues that all evidence is inherently subjective and impacted by politics, values and interests, and laments the inconclusiveness of findings from SRs, calling for greater methodological diversity. Burke (2011) criticizes SRm for potentially discarding relevant data, although he agrees that 'more focused and tailored reviews of evidence' will contribute to evidence-based practice (p. 38). Despite the efforts of the Centre for Evidence-Based Management (CEBMa) to increase awareness and use of SRm, some management researchers are deterred from SRm because of the time-consuming, labour-intensive and process-driven process (Bimrose et al., 2005; Nolan & Garavan, 2015). Yet, some academic programmes, for instance UK-based MSc and doctoral-level programmes, include the execution of SRs as part of the educational process. Further, given that management research is an applied field, we know little about the extent to which SRm guides relevant activities by spelling out and providing a framework for implications for practice. The inclusion of 'grey' literature, that is relevant works published in non-academic outlets and thus typically not subjected to traditional academic peer-review processes, may contribute to making SR findings more readily applicable to practice. Adams et al. (2017) categorized grey literature into three tiers according to the literature's retrievability, with the first tier being significantly retrievable and credible literature (e.g. books, book chapters, government reports, think-tank publications), the second tier including moderately retrievable material (e.g. presentations, studies by nongovernmental organizations, news articles, company publications) and the third tier of low retrievability encompassing blogs, emails, letters and tweets. The tiers of retrievability also correspond to the level of credibility of the materials. While this may raise some questions about the quality and replicability of studies, Adams et al. (2017) argue that the inclusion of grey literature in SRs will contribute to the diversity and flexibility of knowledge.

Distinct frameworks relevant to SRm within management research exist, including CIMO (context, intervention, mechanism, outcome), put forward by Denyer et al. (2008), building on Pawson and Tilley (1997). CIMO is associated firmly with critical realism (Houston, 2014) and realist evaluation methodology (Pawson, 2013), which is purportedly an approach strong on theory-building, explanation (Hawkins, 2016; Salter & Kothari, 2014; Van der Knaap et al. 2008) and contribution to knowledge development (Julnes et al., 1998). Yet, little is known about how such frameworks are utilized in published research, their perceived value and the extent to which they have been developed or refined. Thus, our review set out to revisit the principles of SRm in management research – to be transparent, inclusive, explanatory and heuristic (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009) – and to investigate the development of SRm in the management field.

We paid particular attention to any refinements for the synthesis which aims to identify key scientific contributions and gaps in the literature (Dixon-Woods et al., 2004; Tranfield et al., 2003), to articulate how knowledge may be utilized and to highlight areas of rebalance and focus for subsequent researchers (Denyer et al., 2008). Synthesis is particularly useful in areas of contested findings, to present evidence, consolidate knowledge and therefore progress an area of inquiry (Pawson, 2002). Outside of academia, synthesis is important for management practitioners who, due to resource constraints, are typically unable to undertake or fully review primary research, thus increasing interactions between researchers, research groups and practitioners, and contributing to evidence-based practice (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006). Thus, an effective synthesis is a crucial component of any SR to highlight key findings and their applicability to research, practice and/or policy. That said, it was our assumption that guidance for how an effective synthesis might be achieved may be lacking.

The following review questions, derived through an initial scoping study, guided our SR:

- For what purposes has SRm been used by management researchers?
- When, where, on what topics and by whom have SRs been undertaken and published in the domain (systematic mapping)?
- What methodological approaches to conducting SRs have researchers taken? How have researchers synthesized primary studies and what, if any, developments in methodology for synthesis are evident in SRs?
- What challenges and limitations for using SRm have researchers encountered; how do they affect any potential conclusions and how can they be remediated?
- To what extent do SRs spell out implications for (a) theory, (b) practice and (c) policy; are there any approaches which could inform future best practice?

2 | METHODOLOGY

We carried out an SR of SRs in management research in five successive steps (see e.g. Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Rojon et al., 2011), outlined in Figure 1. Firstly, we determined the scope and review questions of the SR (see previous section), based on an initial non-systematic literature review and expert consultation of eight management scholars with expertise and experience in conducting SRs, using a series of standardized questions pertaining to literature review methodology generally and SRm specifically. Findings of the consultation suggested that SRm is perceived as a useful literature reviewing approach, but that further guidance on how to address specific challenges associated with the method would be helpful. Next, as recommended by Greenhalgh and Peackock (2005), we conducted several independent literature searches to locate as many potentially relevant papers as possible without date parameters. The first and second author, as well as a third, independent researcher, carried out database searches multiple times over the course of 4 years to minimize bias and maximize comprehensiveness. Following elimination of duplicates, we subjected all remaining papers ($N = 1558$) to an initial review to determine suitability for inclusion through inspection of abstracts and methods sections. Three papers were excluded as they were written in Portuguese. Most papers fell short on criteria (i) and/or (iii), as shown in Step 3 below; in other words, they did not present a recognizable SR in the field of management. Reviews that we did not recognize as SRs either did not follow the methodological process for conducting SRs and/or did not adhere to the four aforementioned principles of SRm in management research – transparency, inclusiveness, explanatory and heuristic (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009). For instance, reviews that omitted important steps in the SRm process, such as formulating review question(s) to work towards, or the selection and evaluation of references on the basis of specified criteria, were excluded, as were reviews that failed to transparently explain their methodology and findings.

We synthesized the remaining 391 primary papers using the research questions as a guiding framework in a bespoke data extraction form, eliciting both quantitative and qualitative information. As a further analytical step, given our particular interest in methodological approaches and types of synthesis employed by researchers, we reviewed in more detail 10% ($n = 40$) of all included SRs. These 40 papers were randomly selected by firstly numbering the alphabetically ordered list of papers and secondly picking 40 numbers, blindly and at random. Our decision to review a subset of exactly 40 papers is based on the idea of data saturation: in line with Francis et al. (2010), we initially reviewed a subset of 20 papers in more detail, finding many themes and ideas repeated here. We then chose to review in-depth 20 further papers to be sure no new ideas or themes would emerge (stopping criterion; Francis et al., 2010). Our number of 40 also corresponds to findings from empirical research on data saturation within interviews for both homogeneous and heterogeneous samples, which concluded that this is likely to occur after 12 (Guest et al., 2006) or after 15–60 interviews (Saunders & Townsend, 2016), respectively. The following data were extracted from our subset of 40 SRs: (i) synthesis approach taken (classified according to Rousseau et al., 2008; see below for more detail); (ii) quality appraisal of included papers undertaken (yes/no); and (iii) inclusion of grey literature (yes/no).

3 | FINDINGS

3.1 | Systematic mapping of primary sources

Nearly half of the 391 included SRs (43.7%) were published between 2015 and 2019 (Appendices 1 and 2) across different journals ($N = 188$) from a variety of management subject areas (Appendix 3). There was an indication of regional prevalence as 126 (32.2%) of SRs were written solely by or jointly with UK academics. Many of the remaining articles' (co-)authors were affiliated with other European-based institutions (48.3%), scholars from the USA (12.8%),

FIGURE 1 Overview of SRm process

Canada, Australia and other parts of the world (23.8%[1]) having (co-)published comparatively few SRs.

The number of primary studies included in SRs ranged greatly, from 2 (Parmelli et al., 2011) to 1161 studies (Hiller

[1] Please note that the percentages add up to more than 100 as papers with authors from more than one country (e.g. UK and Egypt) were counted doubly; in six instances it was not possible to determine authors' affiliations.

et al., 2011). Neither of these two extreme values was representative of the typical number of papers examined, most SRs featuring between 45 (25th percentile) and 148 (75th percentile) papers with a median of 77.[2] For some topics, and for very specific questions, the primary literature was sparse, whereas other authors had set limitations on inclusion, often for pragmatic rather than theoretical or conceptual reasons. For instance, Wardhani et al. (2009) narrowed an initial set of 533 papers to only 14 as their review focus was very specific regarding determining factors influencing quality management systems as a total system in hospitals. Other authors used outlets as a proxy for quality, such as Matthews and Marzec (2012), who limited themselves to papers published in 3- and 4-star quality general operations management journals from the Association of Business School rankings on the one hand to 'ensure sufficient quality' and on the other hand 'for the sake of brevity and to maintain the focus' (p. 3) on their specific area of investigation.

The publication date parameters set was very wide, extending from 3 (Davies & Ryals, 2009) to 293 years (Parmelli et al., 2011). That said, most authors reviewed between 13 (25th percentile) and 27 (75th percentile) years of literature, the median being 20 years.[2] Justifications for dates ranges, though infrequently provided, were: (i) ensuring a manageable number of primary sources; (ii) research on the topic starting to emerge – or to gain traction – from a particular year onwards; (iii) usage of all literature available in databases to date; (iv) newer research perceived to be of higher quality and more up-to-date; (v) consideration only of those papers that previous reviews had disregarded or to ensure continuity from previously conducted (systematic) reviews. Most authors had searched for literature in three academic databases; that said, in 68 SRs literature drawn from only one database was presented, an extreme value (median = 3; min = 1; max = 21).

Our frequency and content analysis of papers' keywords (Appendix 1) provided insight into subject areas and topics, demonstrating great variety; first and foremost the general topic of 'management', but also 'supply chain (management)', 'performance', 'sustainable'/'sustainability', 'innovation', 'corporate', 'knowledge', 'measurement', 'marketing', 'development' and 'health', amongst others. This list was in part influenced by our hand-searching strategy, which favoured certain topics, for instance through manual search in *Supply Chain Management*. This shows that the choice of keywords in the search strings can limit, and potentially bias, the range and content of primary sources for inclusion in any review.

3.2 | Quality appraisal: Grey or not grey?

We now turn to findings of our supplementary analysis of a subsample of included SRs. Of the 40 reviewed papers, only nine had considered grey literature in addition to academic sources, such as reports, policy documents, magazine articles or blogs, as well as informal channels of information. Richards (2011) for instance expanded their SR of employees' Internet activities by including press reports to account for important trends in how employees apply new Internet communication technologies, which may otherwise not have been apparent owing to the lengthy lead times involved in the publication of scholarly outputs. Robertson et al. (2015), in their review of the efficacy of resilience training on employee well-being and performance, included reviews and published and non-published trials to comprehensively map the evidence given that primary studies would by default consist of practice-focused field studies. We return to the importance of drawing not only on academic, but also on non-academic literature, in our discussion.

We observed further that only in 9 out of 40 SRs, the authors had undertaken some kind of quality appraisal of their included papers. In assessing the quality of papers for potential inclusion, it was not uncommon for researchers to use 'journal quality' (e.g. derived through subject-specific journal rankings) as the only proxy for primary study quality.

3.3 | Motivation for/purpose of SRm

We coded authors' motivations/motives for choosing SRm over other literature reviewing methods into four broad rationales, which map to Tranfield et al.'s (2003) and Denyer and Tranfield's (2009) definitions of SR/SRm in management research:[3]

[2] Due to a highly positively skewed distribution of the data, obtaining the median and interquartile range was perceived to be a more accurate representation of these variables' central tendency and dispersion than the arithmetic mean and standard deviation.

[3] These are, respectively: 'systematic reviews differ from traditional narrative reviews by adopting a replicable, scientific and transparent process, in other words a detailed technology, that aims to minimize bias through exhaustive literature searches of published and unpublished studies and by providing an audit trail of the reviewers' decisions, procedures and conclusions' (Tranfield et al. 2003, p. 209); 'a specific methodology that locates existing studies, selects and evaluates contributions, analyses and synthesizes data, and reports the evidence in such a way that allows reasonably clear conclusions to be reached about what we do and do not know' (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009, p. 671).

1. *Process*. Scholars selected SRm for representing a rigorous, systematic, transparent and comprehensive approach to analysing, evaluating and synthesizing literature (e.g. Alhejji et al., 2016).
2. *Synthesis*. Researchers used SRm to consolidate disparate, fragmented, complex, large and possibly inconsistent bodies of literature to provide a more holistic understanding of the reviewed topic (e.g. Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). Some authors developed an integrative framework or conceptualization of the extant literature in their field based on the review findings (e.g. Bakhshi et al., 2016).
3. *Current evidence base*. SRm was also used to derive suggested directions for future research (e.g. by being able to identify issues that are currently holding research back; Chicksand et al., 2012) and practice/policy (e.g. managerial implications; Gimenez & Tachizawa, 2012), the latter particularly in regards to 'what works' and 'what does not work' (e.g. Robertson et al., 2015).
4. *Quality*. Scholars embarked on SRs cited the paucity of good-quality reviews in their field as a reason for undertaking their own (e.g. Snyder et al., 2016).

3.4 | Guiding methodological tenets for SRs in management research

SR papers' authors predominantly adhered to SRm guidance adapted to management research (most notably Tranfield et al., 2003), with a few exceptions of authors relying on health-related SRm guidance (e.g. Bamberger et al., 2012; Willis-Shattuck et al., 2008) along the following lines (see also Figure 1). Reviews commenced with determining the question(s), scope (including its boundaries) and protocol to identify sources for the literature search and the search strategy (e.g. search strings for electronic database searches), including inclusion and exclusion criteria. Having carried out searches and deleted any duplicates, researchers extracted relevant information through in-depth review relating to their SR's question(s) to analyse, synthesize and integrate such extracted data and to report and disseminate the findings. That said, there was great variability regarding the level of detail and transparency of methodological explanation. Some outlined their methods in one or two short paragraphs only (e.g. Carpenter et al. 2012; Opengart & Bierema, 2015), and/or failed to justify their methodological decisions (e.g. Überbacher, 2014), whereas others explained the steps they followed in great depth (e.g. Albliwi et al., 2014; Pittaway et al., 2004), occasionally providing flowchart diagrams as visual aids (e.g. Talib et al., 2011; Wardhani et al., 2009). Although most scholars carried out 'regular' SRs, some researchers adapted SRm or combined it with other review approaches. Bibliometric analysis/mapping, for example, was used in combination with SRm (e.g. Coombes & Nicholson, 2013; Saggese et al., 2016), as well as citation network analysis (e.g. Colicchia & Strozzi, 2012; Hueske & Guenther, 2015) or text mining (Ghadge et al., 2012). We now turn to the issue of synthesis in detail as central to our research questions.

3.5 | Presentation, analysis and synthesis in SRs

Management researchers usually presented their findings in two parts, firstly descriptive statistics (e.g. publication year, research context) and secondly the actual content of the papers reviewed, discussed typically in relation to the review's question(s) and/or by (emergent) themes, key aspects or perspectives identified. Some authors limited their discussion of findings to descriptive statistics (e.g. González et al., 2011; Yildiz & Demirors, 2014), which, although useful, cannot substitute a more substantive narrative discussion. In total, 17 authors (e.g. Bailey et al., 2017) structured their discussion according to the CIMO framework, according to propositions derived from their findings (Pilbeam et al., 2012) or simply chronologically (e.g. Salamin & Hanappi, 2014). We noted some exceptionally short findings and discussion sections, for example the quarter of a page provided by Albliwi et al. (2014) provides scant detail to enable the reader to glean any insight based on the SR conducted.

Most SRs contained potential directions for future research, implications and/or recommendations for (managerial) practice, as well as for policy, though the range of their considerations varied greatly, where at one end papers suggested a stepwise process for translating findings to practice (e.g. Birnik & Bowma, 2007), actual practical tips for human resource practice (e.g. Sourouklis & Tsagdis, 2013), to conceptual frameworks (e.g. Ellwood et al., 2016) and the need for further testing and replication of propositions identified (e.g. Smart et al., 2007) at the other end. Conceptual and methodological limitations, including those that may relate to SRm specifically (see below), were also typically included in SRs. Yet, few authors provided a theoretical framework (e.g. Li et al., 2012; Ordanini et al., 2008) to integrate their review's findings.

Overall, we found sparse references to overarching frameworks and/or corresponding epistemology. As an example, our synthesis elicited no references to operationalization of the PICO framework and only 17 references to CIMO (including Christoffersen, 2013; Claus & Biscoe, 2009; Delgado Garcia et al., 2015; Ellwood et al., 2016; Rafi-Ul-Shan et al., 2018). None of these papers offered critique, extensions or conceptual or methodological developments of the frameworks.

In general, the reviews favoured detail on data gathering and logging over detail regarding synthesis and critical examination. Most authors carried out some form of qualitative analysis and synthesis without adhering to any particular method or approach (cf. Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009; Rousseau et al., 2008). For those who did, thematic analysis following Miles and Hubermann (1994) was a popular choice (e.g. Abidi et al., 2014; Claus & Briscoe, 2009; Phillips et al., 2015); other examples included content coding using data management software (Pittaway et al., 2004), interpretative 'meta-synthesis' investigating the underlying structure of selected papers, specifically their differences and similarities (Ashby et al., 2012) and theory-led approaches to synthesizing literature (e.g. Ellwood et al., 2016; Nielsen & Lassen, 2012; Padilla-Meléndez et al., 2015). Few authors (e.g. Burgess et al., 2006; Delbufalo, 2012; Turner et al., 2013) carried out quantitative meta-analyses, although several suggested that their reviews would have benefitted from quantitative integration (e.g. MacEwen et al., 2015; Morello et al., 2013; Pacheco & Garcia, 2012) had the diverse nature of primary studies not precluded such an approach (e.g. very diverse study designs and corresponding measurements).

We also reviewed our subset of 40 primary studies regarding the approach to synthesis taken by authors, drawing on Rousseau et al.'s (2008, p. 491ff) classification, which distinguishes four synthesis methods: (i) aggregation (i.e. quantitative combination of results of primary studies in order to combine effects to increase sample size and reduce bias in answering specific questions and to predict intervention results via more exact estimate than any single study achieves); (ii) integration (i.e. triangulation across multiple studies and methods in order to answer specific questions and explore when interventions are more likely to be appropriate); (iii) interpretation (i.e. compilation of descriptive data and exemplars as well as identification of cross-study concepts and their translation into new categories in order to build higher-order theoretical constructs and create tentative theories of phenomena including patterns of social construction); and (iv) explanation (i.e. discerning patterns behind explanatory claims in order to create explanations and generate theory). Since most authors had not explicitly stated their synthesis approach or offered little detail, it was a question of reading, re-reading and applying our own judgement to determine which of the four categories had been applied. This process led us to conclude that most authors had chosen integration ($n = 22$) or an approach between integration and interpretation ($n = 11$) as their synthesis method. Very few authors had synthesized data through aggregation ($n = 2$). Equally few ($n = 2$) had used interpretation; three papers had opted for a synthesis approach between interpretation and explanation. Therefore, our analysis signals that 'higher-level' synthesis methods, namely interpretation and explanation, were used infrequently by researchers.

The lack of in-depth synthesis was a consistent finding, which we contend is linked to an absence of methodological refinements which deserve increased future development. Synthesis is vital to the SRm process as it provides a chance to reflect on the evidence presented, interpret the research findings and relate the patterns and themes discovered during the literature review (Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Popay et al., 2006) to how such may be applied (Boaz et al., 2006; Pawson, 2002; Rousseau et al., 2008), either for future research, policy-making or practice (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006). We return to this observation in our discussion.

3.6 | Challenges and limitations of SRs

We documented one key limitation through our own search strategy – although hand searching elicited additional primary sources, this meant that certain topics, particularly supply chain management, were over-represented in our final sample. Further hand searches may have elicited additional findings, and thus had an impact on the overall topics. In other words, the method for elicitation of primary studies may bias or influence SRs in the same way that sampling in field or experimental studies may influence the validity of any conclusions to be drawn. Researchers also raised concerns that they were not using 'good' search strings, or that different search strings may have yielded different (and/or more) studies (e.g. Choong, 2014; Williams et al., 2009). Some addressed this, for instance, by cross-checking reference lists for further potentially relevant papers (e.g. Kirchberger & Pohl, 2016).

In addition, researchers were concerned that their selection criteria had been too limiting or rigid, leading to the potential exclusion of important studies (e.g. Neumann & Dul, 2010). It was generally acknowledged that conducting searches in a greater number and wider variety of databases and other sources of literature (including those in non-English language and non-academic publishing outlets) would have been useful in facilitating greater comprehensiveness (e.g. Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa, 2015), although pressures on time and other resources did not always allow for this. In other words, SRm *per se* does not address the issue of selectivity in inclusion, as pragmatic consideration may prevail; it is, however, important to reflect on the role of researcher judgement when making search and interpretation decisions, an aspect which we also return to in our discussion.

Indeed, several researchers concurred on methodological challenges. A commonly voiced criticism was the perceived danger of subjectivity, including researcher judgement and/or their background impacting on the paper selection, coding and interpretation of findings (e.g. Kirchberger & Pohl, 2016). Scholars attempted to address this issue for instance by fully describing and defending any choices made in the SR process (e.g. McFadden, 2015) or by involving stakeholders from other disciplines and/or from outside academia (e.g. Furlan et al., 2011). A second set of issues was concerned with the large volume and diversity of papers uncovered through SRm's comprehensive search strategies, which researchers perceived as challenging both for paper selection, as well as for integrating and synthesizing information (e.g. Bakker, 2010; Richards, 2011). To resolve the issue of managing volume, some authors suggested focusing merely on abstracts (or even titles) when deciding whether or not to include a paper (e.g. Koopmans et al., 2011; Thorpe et al., 2005), although it was acknowledged that this could lead to including only papers with better-written titles/abstracts, whilst perhaps disregarding other potentially relevant articles (e.g. Pittaway et al., 2004).

4 | DISCUSSION

Our 'SR of SRs' set out to investigate where, when, on what and by whom SRs have been published in management research. Our data showed that SRs have been most keenly embraced by UK academics and are not as prevalent in other countries. Possible reasons for this regional prevalence may lie in the UK's *International Journal of Management Reviews* explicitly welcoming SRs, as well as SRm training being provided and the execution of this type of literature review being encouraged in certain doctoral and MSc programmes in the UK. In terms of the purposes and motivations for undertaking SRs, we concluded that SRm has been used to aggregate existing knowledge and to inform and confirm assumptions towards providing new linkages of understanding existing knowledge (Gough et al., 2012). Further, SRm is seen as an effective approach for providing a holistic overview of often complex literature spanning disciplinary boundaries (e.g. Crossan & Apaydin, 2010; Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011).

Most researchers followed SR methodology as put forward by Denyer and Tranfield (2009), who were amongst the first to advocate the method and provided a helpful step-by-step guide. That said, as ascertained by our analysis of a subset of reviewed SRs (n = 40), nearly a third of researchers (32.5%) adapted the 'standard' SRm process to a greater or lesser extent to fit their own needs. They did so for instance by subjecting extracted data to specific additional qualitative or quantitative analyses (e.g. Cheng, 2016; Finnegan et al., 2016) or by using conceptual frameworks, derived *a priori*, to guide and organize their SR (e.g. Kokkonen & Alin, 2015; Wong et al., 2013). In all cases, adaptations to SR methodology were justified by authors in relation to their specific SR's purpose and aims, as in the case of Mariano and Awazu (2016) for example, who carried out longitudinal and other statistical analyses by way of understanding the development of their field of study. Such adaptations to the process are, in our opinion, an assertive, pragmatist and welcome move towards utilizing and modifying existing methodology in a way that is most suitable for specific research requirements, rather than rigidly holding on to prescribed protocols. Yet, such adaptation of the SRm process requires researcher judgement which situates the researcher as an important source of knowledge given the overarching purpose of SRs to take existing knowledge into new directions (Briner & Rousseau, 2011) by creating opportunities for management scholars to engage, extend and interpret such knowledge in a meaningful way (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009; Jones, 2004). We also contend that pragmatic considerations should be explicitly considered in any synthesis and/or limitations section where they affect the conclusions to be drawn. Quality appraisal is clearly an issue where practice widely diverges and the use of proxies is common, as previously observed. 'Quality' within SRm is usually equated with methodological quality or rigour that is 'the internal validity and the degree to which [the SR's] design, conduct and analysis have minimized biases or errors' (Tranfield et al., 2003, p. 15). Whilst SRs conducted on health-related topics within the Cochrane framework often specify inclusion only of randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or similar types of studies, these assumed to be the 'gold standard' of methodological rigour (Reay et al., 2009), in management research 'quality' relating to SRs tends to be understood somewhat more loosely. There is, to date, no definitive approach to assessing the quality of SRs within management research, though several scholars have assembled lists of quality criteria that can be applied to judge the quality of studies considered for inclusion in an SR (e.g. Abalos et al., 2001; Briner et al., 2009; Garg et al., 2008; Tranfield et al., 2003). Given that limited primary literature will in turn limit the conclusions which can be drawn within an SR, more consideration should be given to the aspect of quality appraisal. We discuss this further below.

4.1 | The central role of synthesis

Having previously established the importance of synthesis, the question arises of how it should be carried out. We considered the CIMO logic advocated by Denyer et al. (2008) as a design-oriented research synthesis focusing on providing solutions and answering research questions (Denyer et al., 2008; Jones & Gattrell, 2014; Van Aken, 2004). Our analysis elicited 17 primary sources which referred to the CIMO framework. Yet, none of these offered substantial critique or extension. It is a central observation arising from our data analysis that there is an inextricable link between a lack of use of relevant frameworks and a lack of advancement regarding the application, refinement and development to further the sophistication and applicability of synthesis methods.

Different types of primary studies will suit different types of synthesis (cf. Barnett-Page & Thomas, 2009), such as quantitative primary studies facilitating aggregation. Much greater attention should be given to this aspect in the planning phase of any review. Our detailed coding of a subset of included SRs established that most papers drew on an integrative synthesis approach, which is suited to the collection and comparison of evidence involving two or more data-gathering methods. This type of synthesis typically seeks to provide answers to predetermined questions and thus lends itself to addressing both academic and practice- or policy-oriented issues. Methods of synthesis that provide deeper theoretical interpretation to further knowledge in management research, that is interpretation and explanation (Rousseau et al., 2008), were rarely used. With regard to the few instances where authors had drawn on interpretation and/or explanation approaches (i.e. Baldacchino et al., 2015; Glover et al., 2014; Hansen & Schaltegger, 2016), we noted that researchers had set a dedicated focus on providing theoretical constructs and creating explanations right from the outset of their SR, for instance by phrasing their review questions in such a way that literature suitable to their aim would be located in the first instance and synthesized in the second instance. Owing to their focus on theory and conceptualization, these two types of synthesis seem to be more easily applicable to academic endeavours rather than seeking to answer practitioner or policy questions.

4.2 | Presentation of results and findings

Thorpe et al.'s (2005) paper, one of the first SRs published within management research, suggests that 'the aim [of a systematic review] is to bring together as many already existing evidence-based studies as possible that are relevant to the research being undertaken, irrespective of their published location, or even disciplinary background' (p. 258). They postulate eight basic principles behind SRm, namely transparency, clarity, focus, unification of research and practitioner communities, equality, accessibility, broad coverage and finally, and importantly, synthesis. In some of the SRs we reviewed, whilst study findings were presented for instance by providing facts (e.g. Delbufalo, 2012), these findings were not synthesized towards an interpretation of what the retrieved knowledge contributed to. Yet, synthesis is a crucial phase of SRm for illuminating knowledge and providing suggestions for future research (Rousseau et al., 2008). Though a clear presentation of facts is important to understand existing knowledge in the subject area, critical analysis, together with a discussion of what the findings mean and how they can be interpreted and applied to knowledge in the subject area, will further contribute to the quality of a paper (e.g. Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011; Überbacher, 2014). SRs will benefit from a higher level of abstraction that expounds on the concepts and themes in the critically reviewed materials towards identifying where the boundaries from which knowledge can be expanded lie. This, we argue, requires a more germane way of seeing how various strands of research focus interact with one another and will contribute to the comprehensiveness and quality of SRs in management research.

Discussions from SRs or any other studies should be robust enough and link how the findings met the research objectives, together with any other unexpected findings. This will enable the systematic reviewer to make sense of the diverse findings related to a research context and communicate in a powerful manner, including their reflections. We advocate that SRm in the field of management research should always consider including a form of conceptual synthesis. This will encourage the development of theoretical contributions and the consideration of eventual implications for practice. To do so, SR researchers need to articulate a clear synthesis framework and their epistemology from the outset, and either offer a conceptual framework *a priori* to guide their review or deduct such a framework from the synthesis. Such an approach will enable clear articulation not only about 'what worked', but which theories and frameworks can explain relevant observations and what the implications for future research, practice and potentially policy are. It is our observation that SRs are under-theorized. As Gatrell and Breslin (2017) wrote in their editorial, authors should not only aim to make a conceptual contribution, but also not be shy to challenge the field. SRs have the capacity to do both, as unlike conceptual reviews articulating propositions, they are based on a range of empirical data to draw from. Therefore, one of the most fundamental and necessary questions to ask is 'how can the findings best be theorized?'. Stutton and Staw (1995) noted in their seminal paper that neither data, hypotheses, results, variables, illustrations nor lengthy references make theory; in other words, researchers must not fall into the trap that thorough documentation in and of itself is sufficient. SR researchers in the field of management have a unique opportunity to utilize data to question and potentially refine knowledge and understanding by considering not only confirmation but also disconfirming of theoretical propositions (see Leavitt et al., 2010 on theory pruning). Such an approach may lead to a more theoretically founded explication of what we know, as well as what we do not know.

4.3 | Linking systematic reviews to practice

In education, public policy and healthcare, SRs are conducted to inform policy-makers and practitioners. However, our review suggests that in management, study findings were generally aimed at academic audiences with the exception of a handful of papers (e.g. Murta et al., 2007; Phillips et al., 2015). SRs, like other types of research conducted in management, should move towards linking theory with practice (Scurry & Blenkinsopp, 2011). To do this, we recommend an integral section on how the research question(s) and findings can inform and influence practice in organizations and/or in policy-making. This will increase the relevance of the findings, and stimulate conversations between academia and practice, which will contribute to the creation of a dynamic and more vibrant applied research atmosphere in management research. We expect that such focus on opening up our conversations to practitioners in the field may create opportunities for future collaboration. An example of an SR that explicitly sought to inform practice is Marcos and Denyer's (2012) collaboration between an academic institution and a consultancy company. Despite having experienced various challenges in their collaborative research, the authors concluded, on a positive note, that 'the findings of the systematic review became a means to an end rather than an end in itself' (p. 454). The SR process facilitated discussions of key constructs within the project team and, in the absence of (strong) evidence, practitioners and academics were able to 'share, appreciate and challenge their distinct views of managerial and organizational problems' (p. 454).

Aside from such collaborative research, practice can also be better informed by including grey literature in management SRs (Adams et al., 2017). Although peer-reviewed academic sources may provide strong evidence of quality, the exclusion of grey literature may result in conclusions drawn that do not capture the full spectrum of available knowledge, which for management research can contribute to a richer understanding of the linkages between academia and practice, and gaps for future (applied) research. Adams et al. (2017) recommend that researchers present the findings from grey literature separately from those of white literature.

In their analysis of grey literature usage within published academic SRs, Adams et al. (2017) found that only about 23% had incorporated this type of literature. Our own figure (23%) of the usage of grey literature within a subset of the SRs we reviewed ($n = 40$) tallies precisely with that of Adams et al. (2017), suggesting that consideration of this type of literature within academic SRs remains at a relatively low level. Far from embracing the different perspectives offered by grey literature, some authors explicitly chose to exclude such sources (e.g. Finnegan et al., 2016; Keupp & Gassmann, 2009; Mariano & Awazu, 2016), usually arguing that academic papers provide a more suitable and high-quality coverage of the subject under review. Frequently they cited Podsakoff et al. (2005), who suggested that journal articles can be considered validated knowledge and are likely to have the highest impact on the field. The few authors who did consider grey literature mostly used sources such as books and book chapters, reports published by professional organizations and governmental agencies or conference symposia, these all falling within the first, most easily retrievable and most credible tier of grey literature according to Adams et al. (2017). The inclusion of grey literature was at times explicitly referred to by authors, explaining, for instance, that they sought a 'more inclusionary approach' to reviewing the literature (Glover et al., 2014, p. 41), or aimed at further informing and increasing their pool of papers in this way (e.g. Johns & Torres, 2005; Lightfoot et al., 2013). Others argued that the consideration of grey literature had facilitated a more 'balanced and comprehensive review' (Baldacchino et al., 2015, p. 214). This poses a need to consider the epistemological question of what knowledge is, where it is located and where it can come from for an identification and assessment of possible sources of knowledge that can contribute to management research and practice. This then requires stronger inter-relationships between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, and remaining up-to-date on all relevant publications as relates to a subject matter. This development, to include grey literature in management SRs, has implications as to how future management research questions are phrased, the depth of the research design and the sources considered in answering the research questions. We encourage fellow researchers to continue to engage with the epistemological question posed by including grey literature, particularly as relates to linking academia with practice.

In summary, we propose, along with Thorpe et al. (2005), that SRs in management research expand their searches to incorporate the breadth of studies available in academic and non-academic sources of knowledge so long as the principles of SRm – to be transparent, inclusive, explanatory and heuristic (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009) – are adhered to. Given that any studies located for potential inclusion ought to be subject to a quality assessment, the rigour of the SR is maintained.

4.4 | Areas of improvement of SRm for management research

We now suggest refinements to the methodology. SRm is perceived to foster interdisciplinary research, as demonstrated, amongst others, by Greenhalgh et al. (2004) and De Jong et al. (2015). Yet, some authors noted that SRm is less useful at producing in-depth insight into issues (Lightfoot et al., 2013). Indeed, not all SRs yielded new insights over and above existing literature reviews (e.g. Albliwi et al., 2014), and neither was it always sufficiently evident how SRm would have addressed authors' research questions better than other review methodologies (e.g. Deligkaris et al., 2014; Kamal & Irani, 2014).

It appeared that scholars focused on the quantity of literature reviewed for SRs, where, at times, a 'more is better' mentality was evident, with only a few papers reporting on some type of quality appraisal. Yet, the important aspect in a review is not necessarily the sheer amount of literature reviewed, but the quality of the literature included, as higher-quality primary papers enable more confident conclusions. It is important for researchers to critically assess the quality of existing studies to go beyond the cherry-picking of traditional literature reviews (Überbacher, 2014). We suspect that a reason for many researchers not undertaking a quality appraisal of papers found lies in the time-consuming nature of doing thus – as noted, for instance, by Rojon et al. (2011). That said, in our coding of a subset of included SRs, we found a handful of articles where authors did assess the quality of potentially relevant papers; we discuss some examples of these here.

As a relatively straightforward step to quality assessment, some authors (e.g. Flint & Webster, 2014; Morello et al., 2013; Parmelli et al., 2011; Zwarenstein et al., 2009) applied methodological quality and selection criteria, namely to include only RCTs, controlled clinical trials, controlled before–after studies or interrupted time-series studies. Whilst such an approach may be useful for selecting high-quality studies for SRs about health-related topics, and may be looked upon favourably by the Cochrane Library, it is impossible for most SRs in management research to only consider certain study designs such as RCTs, given their paucity in this subject area. It should also be pointed out that such an approach to quality assessment can be very restrictive and not particularly informative – as for instance in the case of Parmelli et al. (2011), who, on the basis of their quality criteria, included only two studies in their SR. A different approach to quality appraisal was taken by Parris and Peachey (2013) who, distinguishing between quantitative and qualitative studies, used a series of critical appraisal tools and criteria to classify papers into low, medium and high quality. A quantitative study judged to be of high quality was understood as being clearly focused and well planned, providing sufficient background, using validated measures and rigorous data-analysis procedures, amongst other criteria. A qualitative study judged to be of high quality had to comply with aspects such as clearly stating a purpose, identifying the researcher's theoretical or philosophical perspective, describing the selection of participants, as well as the results well and comprehensively. Such an approach to quality appraisal, where different criteria are applied to different types of studies, appears useful, particularly given the diversity of study designs employed in management research.

A similar, though more generic approach to quality appraisal, since no distinction was made between quantitative and qualitative studies, was adopted by Sweeney et al. (2019). Each article deemed relevant by these authors was inspected in terms of the clarity of the research question, the appropriateness of the methodology and the rigour with which it was employed, the size of the sample selected, the specification of theoretical frameworks and measurement approaches, and the validity of the research findings.

A somewhat different take on quality appraisal was offered by Reay et al. (2009), who developed a classification of evaluation standards consisting of six 'levels' of evidence to evaluate the strength of evidence in management research. Level 1 encompasses meta-analyses and RCTs and represents the strongest level of evidence, whilst papers falling into level 6 state the opinion of respected authorities or expert committees without additional data, this representing the weakest and, in the case of Reay et al.'s (2009) SR, most frequently located type of evidence. Of the various different ways to appraise paper quality that we have outlined here, we believe that researchers need to consider carefully which may be most suited to their own endeavour, since, for instance, a rigorous approach suitable for health-related SRs might be too restrictive for many management topics. A more generic approach to assessing quality, such as used by Parris and Peachy (2013) or Sweeney et al. (2019) might, in many cases, be more feasible and appropriate, not unduly excluding most studies on the grounds of very strict study design-related criteria whilst still ensuring the inclusion of high-quality papers.

Furthermore, we saw little evidence that methods and frameworks for synthesis – as suggested by various guidelines and researchers – have fully penetrated the SR literature. It would be a fruitful avenue for future research to critically examine the potential impact of using such frameworks (or their absence) on the clarity and robustness of any synthesis offered. It is notable that the papers that did provide a clear framework for analysis, for instance through content coding, appeared to offer more theoretically grounded integration (e.g. Nielsen & Lassen, 2012; Pittaway et al., 2004). Regarding implications for research, policy and practice, we identified less than a handful of papers that addressed all three aspects, most authors considering predominantly academic implications, with some focusing only on practical implications. Policy implications were, on the whole, less often considered, partly because this may be less pertinent to the substantive topic, or partly because the researchers had not deemed this sufficiently relevant. We therefore suggest the intended audience should be given greater consideration by SRm scholars in the field of management. We also note that papers ranged greatly in quality and depth as to how implications for research, policy and practice had been addressed. If implications were spelled out more clearly, the relevance of SRs may spread more swiftly beyond the academic community in management research.

4.5 | A guide for future execution

Informed by our findings and building on researchers' actual SR/SRm experiences (Mallet et al., 2012), as well as earlier work by colleagues (e.g. Tranfield et al., 2003), we propose a guide for undertaking SRs in management research, which is the major contribution of our paper. This we offer in Table 1 as a checklist mapping our contributions against Tranfield et al.'s (2003) original framework; we largely omit Stage 0 as we take it as a given that the need to review has been established. We re-emphasize the need to embed and articulate theoretical frameworks, propositions and implications. Yet, we also stress that regardless of any guidelines, researcher judgement remains important in adapting and focusing the SR to suit the researcher's objectives and resources (Briner & Rousseau, 2011). SRm should not be so rigid as to become protocol for protocol's sake, but retain clear audit trails and justifications for all stages of the process, not merely the data elicitation and logging. What we seek to add is that some focus be applied to how results are presented, with consideration for the various applicability by other researchers, policy-makers and practitioners. As not all aspects mentioned in Table 1 are necessarily relevant to all SRs, we ask researchers to use their judgement, particularly with regard to the recommendations provided.

4.6 | Study limitations and suggestions for future research

We acknowledge several shortcomings as firstly, the primary reviews we included had predominantly been published in academic journals and may thus have missed out important papers available in grey sources. Consequently, researchers wishing to further our study might focus their research on reviews published within grey sources, available, for instance, from CEBMa, the Campbell Collaboration or the EPPI-Centre. Secondly, in our locating of papers, we focused initially on their titles, abstracts and methodology sections (rather than on their full texts) and, by doing so, may have unintentionally excluded potentially relevant SRs in management research. Thirdly, our review was limited by the search strings we used and by our iterative journal-specific searches. We also acknowledge that studies may exist within the management research literature, which have used SRm without referring to specific SR-related terms. We therefore suggest that management researchers undertaking SRs explicitly include the term 'systematic review' in the keywords and abstracts for their articles. Moreover, some of our analyses pertained to a subset of SRs and, whilst we have provided a rationale for focusing on exactly 40 papers rather than reviewing in great detail all 391 papers, we acknowledge that claims made on the basis of findings from a subset of SRs may be less valid compared to claims based on findings from the whole sample. Future methodological research into SRs might thus seek to generalize the validity of our findings by undertaking similar analyses with different and larger samples of SRs.

A key area for future research is a comparison of literature databases generally used by management researchers, and the rationale given for choosing one database over another. This can assist in integrating literature from different databases and improve on their cataloguing to enable future SRs to be more comprehensive. Furthermore, given that SRs can be conducted for various reasons – for instance with the aim of focusing on policy and practical implications, rather than on contributions to the scholarly debate – it would be useful to explore potential methodological differences associated with different rationales for carrying out SRs.

Further research can create interactive 'evidence maps' to identify what is known and not known, which researchers seeking to undertake an SR can review as a first point of call prior to commencing primary research.

TABLE 1 Conducting SRs in management research: A checklist and set of recommendations to guide good practice

SR stage	Tranfield et al. (2003, p. 214)	Issues to address	Examples of good practice from the literature	Recommendations
Theoretical articulation	N/A	As part of the review planning process, articulate clearly where and how a theoretical framework will be incorporated. Address a conceptual and theoretical framework either *a priori* or developed and derived from the primary literature. Ensure theoretical considerations are incorporated into discussion and conclusion.	This aspect should permeate the entire review, rather than be addressed as a separate stage. For guidance on the use of theory, see Leavitt et al. (2010) and Sutton and Staw (1995).	In the planning stage, consider: (a) Is there an existing conceptual or theoretical framework? If not, is the objective to derive this from the literature, and if so, how? For the analysis consider: (b) A synthesis method which encourages theoretical development, such as content coding, thematic analysis. For the discussion consider: (c) Have the findings been sufficiently theorized? What is the theoretical contribution to knowledge from which conclusions can be drawn?
Setting of review objec-tives/questions	Stage I, Phase 1 and 2: Preparation of review proposal and protocol	Clarity of review questions and relevance of review objectives to respective audience(s).	De Menezes and Kelliher (2011) provide clear research objectives and a review question and also state upfront the ways findings from their SR could be translated to research, practice and policy.	Set out a clear framework for your SR from the outset, including clarity about the intended audience, and consider the use of an expert panel: (a) Is the SR relevant to research, practice and/or policy, or a combination? (b) Are your review questions clear and unambiguous to your audience?
Consider epistemology and paradigm	Stage I, Phase 1 and 2; see also Table 1 in their original paper which outlines the divergence in management research (as opposed to positive paradigms where SRm originated)	The origins of SRm are positivist, however there is a growing body of alternative epistemologies, including pragmatic, critical realist, realist evaluation or realist synthesis approaches.	Aboal et al. (2014) highlight the importance of considering epistemology within SRm, describing their own approach as realist synthesis.	Articulate your epistemology clearly in the relevant methods section and explain how this informs the synthesis method chosen.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

SR stage	Tranfield et al. (2003, p. 214)	Issues to address	Examples of good practice from the literature	Recommendations
The SRm protocol & search strategy	Stage I, Phase 2: Preparation of protocol	Ensure that search strategy and protocol are transparent and replicable.	Baldacchino et al. (2015) offer a step-by-step methodology section which facilitates the critical analysis of the data synthesized. Greenhalgh et al. (2004), working with a complex body of evidence, developed a multi-faceted search strategy, including database and hand searches, as well as searches within own scholarly networks and tracking references of references, amongst others. As an aside, we note increasing journal requirements for pre-publication registration of SR protocols. Will such initiatives strengthen methodological rigour, or stifle the use of researcher judgement?	In the relevant methods section ensure that: (a) Inclusion and exclusion criteria are defined. (b) Defend any limiting parameters (e.g. date ranges). (c) Set out a detailed protocol and consider your search strategy, including keywords and databases used. (d) Pre-register your protocol, wherever possible.
Methodological refine-ments/alterations of existing standard protocols	N/A	It may be warranted to deviate from or add to existing 'best practice' protocols as befits your review question(s) and primary literature.	Mariano and Awazu (2016) carried out longitudinal and other statistical analyses by way of understanding the development of their field of study.	Justify clearly why and how you customized existing SR implementation guidelines and leave an audit trail for replicability for other researchers.
Inclusion of grey literature	Stage I, phase 2: Part of protocol development	Give consideration to the relevance of grey literature, particularly where the review aims are linked to policy and/or practice.	Adams et al. (2017) offer guidelines for best practice on the inclusion of grey literature; we acknowledge the pragmatic challenges of casting the net wide, particularly for unfunded reviews undertaken by practitioners.	Address this by: (a) Handsearching open-source data. (b) Including practitioners and/or policy-makers in your expert panel. (c) Where possible and relevant, limiting the inclusion range by date or other parameters to consider pragmatic aspects.

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

SR stage	Tranfield et al. (2003, p. 214)	Issues to address	Examples of good practice from the literature	Recommendations
Consider researcher judgement and 'bias'	Stage II, Phase 4: Selection of studies	There is always a judgement call on the part of researchers, such as whether to conduct hand searches for further literature, contact experts or include specific literature or not (e.g. whether or not to 'cast the net wider' in case there is merely a small body of primary studies).	No one paper in our sample addressed this aspect comprehensively. We recommend researchers to engage in reflective practice on how search protocols, search strategies, inclusion criteria, quality and relevance appraisals may have impacted on any conclusions drawn.	In the absence of guidance from the literature, we suggest to: (a) Address the issue of inclusion through discussion within the research team and consultation of an expert panel where appropriate. (b) Explicitly address the implications of literature inclusion in terms of SR limitations.
Quality assessment and filtering process	Stage II, Phase 4: Quality assessment	Outline the quality assessment and your filtering process at each review stage. Consider the use of quality check lists, rather than 'heuristics' such as journal impact factors as a sole proxy for quality to ensure a holistic assessment process which is linked back to the review questions.	Glover et al. (2014), offering a very clear methodological protocol, highlighted the importance of undertaking quality appraisal and explained their own assessment of paper quality in great detail. To this we add that relevance to the research question(s) (as well as how the primary literature answered the respective questions) should be integral to this process.	Address this by: (a) Crafting your own quality check list as appropriate to your method and field and publishing this as part of the SR (e.g. as an appendix). (b) Critically considering whether 'more is better', and conversely whether an overly restrictive approach will make the SR less insightful (e.g. only including RCTs). (c) Considering whether qualitative and quantitative studies need to be evaluated separately (e.g. Parris & Peachey, 2013).

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

SR stage	Tranfield et al. (2003, p. 214)	Issues to address	Examples of good practice from the literature	Recommendations
Systematic mapping	Stage II, Phase 6: Data extraction	Consider systematic mapping if this is relevant to your approach to outline where, when and how relevant literature has been published.	The EPPI-Centre offers a variety of guidance documents that can assist in producing a systematic map of papers included (e.g. EPPI-Centre, 2003), which can be helpful for deciding what aspects might be relevant for a systematic mapping on one's own topic (e.g. context and setting of the study, date, population focus, study design); numerous examples of SRs including systematic maps (e.g. Schucan Bird et al., 2015) available from the EPPI-Centre (https://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/) further contribute to understanding of systematic mapping.	Consider from the outset if systematic mapping would enhance your understanding of the primary studies. If yes, include this as part of your methods section.
Synthesis	Stage II, Phase 7: Synthesis	Outline and defend your synthesis approach so that readers can backtrack how literature has been analysed and evaluated. Consider the use of illustrations or tables to guide the reader. We argue that more consideration should be given to the choice of synthesis as part of the review planning.	Phelps et al. (2012) offer a transparent structure for their synthesis; Reay et al. (2009) utilize a helpful table to support their analysis; Sweeney et al. (2019) offer a simple 'guide for analytical reading' in eight steps which other researchers could adopt or adapt. Xia et al. (2018) provide an explicit account of content analysis for the synthesis, including a table to guide the reader. Denyer et al. (2008) propose the CIMO framework to offer a design-oriented realist synthesis of the literature. Rather than as a distinct stage, theoretical consideration should permeate and be developed as part of the review process by asking 'how well have we theorized the findings?'	Before you commence the review, consider the data from the scoping stage to determine: (a) What kind of synthesis will be appropriate and feasible for your data? (b) Which kind of synthesis will best answer your research questions? (c) Are you competent to undertake the relevant synthesis? If not, is further training/development or expansion of the research team needed? (d) Have you 'pushed' yourself to strive towards conceptual synthesis and a high level of abstraction?

(Continues)

TABLE 1 (Continued)

SR stage	Tranfield et al. (2003, p. 214)	Issues to address	Examples of good practice from the literature	Recommendations
Limitations of primary literature		Address any limitations of the primary literature clearly, for instance with regard to generalizability to other samples and contexts.	Morello et al. (2013) acknowledge the limitations of single-site studies clearly in their discussion, thus setting appropriate caveats.	Informed by your systematic mapping and the quality appraisals (see above), address this aspect explicitly in your limitations section.
Limitations of own methodological approach		Openly acknowledge and discuss (consequences of) any potential limitations of your approach to data gathering and analysis.	Hallinger (2018) considers limitations of their methodology, with particular emphasis on the data collection phase (e.g. their focus on papers written in English, despite being aware that much research on their topic might be in French or Arabic) in a dedicated section of their discussion.	Caveat the discussion where appropriate and keep implications tentative where needed. Address in the limitations section.
Implications		Discuss implications of your SR's findings for theory, research, practice and/or policy.	Many papers address solely implications for theory and research. An example of where implications of one's SR findings besides theory and research are equally reflected upon is Abbasi and Nilsson's (2012) paper on making supply chains environmentally sustainable, in which they consider also implications of their findings for policy-makers and managers within organizations.	Address this by: (a) At a high level, considering the epistemology (what knowledge is in this context, where it comes from, etc.); see also recommendations for grey literature. (b) Ensuring that practice and policy implications are spelled out in the discussion. (c) Reflecting on the extent to which SR was a collaborative process between different stakeholders (see e.g. Marcos & Denyer, 2012) to open up conversation. (d) Considering further dissemination through workshops, etc. to increase likelihood of relevance to policy and practice.

Such evidence maps as used in development studies (Snilstveit et al., 2013) are a mapping of where there is paucity of knowledge, and serve to consolidate what has already been done, to inform theory-building. Evidence maps can be updated following every SR, which is then submitted to the database. In this way, researchers can understand what knowledge exists already, this reducing the costs of duplicated research efforts. Such evidence maps also enable researchers to directly identify the need for, and therefore the contributions of their work to, knowledge, policy and practice (Phillips et al., 2015). Thus, evidence maps may be useful additions to management research given the high costs of SRs and the fragmented nature of the field.

4.7 | The way forward

We now turn to further considerations concerning 'the way forward' for SRm in management research. Along the same lines as Briner et al. (2009; see also Briner & Denyer, 2012), we recommend that SRs be conducted in such a way as to critically evaluate the quality of available knowledge, in particular, the quality of papers included in the review. Whilst we realize that doing a thorough quality appraisal is time-consuming, consistently using predefined quality criteria or critical appraisal tools (e.g. Parris & Peachy, 2013; Rojon et al., 2011; Sweeney et al., 2019) could contribute to making the evaluation process faster and easier – and will ultimately result in SRs reporting higher-quality evidence. It will be useful for researchers to present their inclusion and exclusion criteria for the sources of knowledge used in their SRs with reference to the quality of available papers in the subject area. Evaluation within SRm can, amongst others, include the extent to which: (i) the methods used were defined and specified; (ii) the methodology enabled the research question(s) to be answered; (iii) the findings from the study were appropriately interpreted; and (iv) the findings were analysed and categorized, to reveal insights and contribute to knowledge as well as provide recommendations for future research, practice and policy (Abalos et al., 2001).

Synthesis is a very important component of SRm. Crucially, we see it as imperative to offer critical and conceptual synthesis, and in Table 1 we have provided a checklist and recommendations to guide good practice. As part of researchers' methodological considerations, a synthesis approach should be decided upon and this will require a review of existing synthesis approaches. At its core, the synthesis is a way to critically draw together the evidence from the primary research undertaken, and to assess the extent to which the SR has addressed its research questions and the insights gained from the literature. Importantly, especially considering the time constraints of management practitioners and policy-makers, the synthesis should be able to function as a standalone document that presents in a succinct manner: (i) the research question(s); (ii) the rationale for the area(s) of focus; (iii) evidence found, insights gleaned and how they have addressed the research question(s); together with (iv) applicability for academia, practice and policy. It should also clearly identify areas where knowledge gaps exist. This will lead on to the section on limitations of the SR and suggestions of areas for future research. In this way, the synthesis will also provide a rich avenue for future refinement of the methodology, in particular regarding the use and refinement of theoretical considerations.

SRs are not an end in themselves (Schlosser, 2007), but are conducted for a purpose, to provide more understanding and develop knowledge about a research area. Therefore, SRs in management research should be aimed at discovering and expanding the boundaries of where knowledge lies in a specified subject area (Humphrey, 2011). This includes a widening of the scope for research, as well as a deeper interrogation of research questions and gaps in knowledge, to investigate how these gaps can be addressed. We encourage SR researchers to be bolder in articulating potential evidence for, but also challenges against, relevant explanatory theoretical frameworks.

Evidence is important in policy development and guiding managers (Waddington et al., 2018). Yet, primary studies are not usually in a format accessible by the decision-makers who need the knowledge provided in the research pieces. Syntheses of SRs go beyond literature review and can also reveal the evidence gaps that exist in an area of inquiry. Such reviews will need to be kept up-to-date to increase relevance in terms of scope, and frequency, to further ensure that management knowledge is consolidated. We further recommend that SRs put more focus on relevant methods for, and articulations from, a clearly articulated synthesis, which includes implications of research for theory, policy and practice (Waddington et al., 2018).

5 | CONCLUSION

Our paper has provided a review of SRs in management research, together with suggestions of how future SRs can be conducted to increase the quality and quantity of SRs and ultimately contribute to the quality and comprehensiveness of management research more widely. With the exception of Adams et al. (2017), who considered the use of grey literature within SRm, our paper is the only empirically based study to have analysed previous and current usage of SRs within management research. Our paper is also the first to synthesize a body of SRs in management research with particular reference to how SRm *per se* does not necessarily preclude any bias and subjectivity, but also the central importance of synthesis. We found relatively little evidence on careful consideration of the latter and suggest this as an avenue for future development and enquiry.

We note that little mention was made by researchers of studies included in our review on how SRm can be changed or developed. We propose that a constant critical evaluation of how SRm can be improved upon, as we have offered here, will be beneficial to management research, to encourage a focus on continuous improvement of research work. On the basis of existing quality reviews in their fields, researchers can integrate and coalesce knowledge, and by so doing form building blocks of knowledge that can be assembled, combined and reconfigured with one another. This, we suggest, is where future SRs in management research should be positioned.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.

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