

# Using review articles to address societal grand challenges

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## Abstract

We introduce a special issue of *International Journal of Management Reviews* that demonstrates how to use review articles to address societal grand challenges—complex, large-scale issues facing humankind, such as climate change, inequality and poverty. First, we argue that review articles possess unique features that make them particularly useful for addressing societal grand challenges. Second, we discuss three distinct but related roles of review articles in addressing societal grand challenges: (1) advancing theoretical knowledge; (2) advancing methodological knowledge; and (3) advancing practical knowledge. We conclude by providing future directions to enhance contributions of review articles for addressing societal grand challenges further by: (a) spanning disciplinary boundaries; (b) engaging practitioners; and (c) using alternative review approaches.

## INTRODUCTION

Societal grand challenges are complex, large-scale issues facing humankind, such as climate change, inequality and poverty (George et al., 2016).<sup>1</sup> We introduce a special

<sup>1</sup>The origins of the term are often attributed to Hilbert (1902). His list focused on knowledge problems in a specific discipline (mathematics). In a presidential address to the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Omenn (2006) introduced three categories of grand challenges, including 'disciplinary grand challenges' and 'societal grand challenges'. He used the different categories of grand challenges to discuss the role of science and research in various disciplines, including social sciences, for progress in society. In this article, we focus on societal grand challenges.

issue of *International Journal of Management Reviews* that demonstrates how to use review articles in management and organization studies (MOS) to address societal grand challenges. The impetus for this special issue is that review articles have unique features that are particularly useful for addressing societal grand challenges (Kunisch et al., 2020). First, review articles can widen the scope of a problem, discover general patterns and expose gaps and inconsistencies in the literature. Second, review articles can integrate streams of research across theories and research domains and even entire fields and disciplines.

Indeed, the last decade has witnessed a rapidly growing body of research in MOS that addresses societal grand challenges (Howard-Grenville & Spengler, 2022; Kunisch

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et al., 2020). Scholars in various areas, including accounting and finance (e.g., Goergen & Rondi, 2019), corporate governance (e.g., Pop et al., 2023), entrepreneurship and innovation (e.g., George et al., 2021; Markman et al., 2019; Ricciardi et al., 2021; Voegtlin et al., 2019), international business (e.g., Buckley et al., 2017; McIntyre et al., 2022; Montiel et al., 2021; Tatarinov et al., *in press*), leadership and organization studies (e.g., Baumann et al., 2021; Gümüşay et al., 2022; Schad & Smith, 2019) and supply chain management (e.g., Kano & Hoon Oh, 2020; Panwar et al., 2022), have started to address societal problems. However, despite the growing scholarly interest in addressing societal problems, there is a risk of it stalling on purely theoretical and incremental empirical research.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of review articles in MOS that address societal problems. We start by briefly describing the unique features of review articles that make them particularly useful for addressing societal grand challenges. Then, we explain three roles of review articles to produce knowledge to help tackle societal grand challenges: (1) advancing *theoretical knowledge*; (2) advancing *methodological knowledge*; and (3) advancing *practical knowledge*. We illustrate these roles with the articles published in this special issue, as well as other review articles that address societal problems. Finally, we provide future directions to enhance contributions of review articles for addressing societal grand challenges further by: (a) spanning disciplinary boundaries; (b) engaging practitioners; and (c) using alternative review approaches. Taken together, the articles in this special issue demonstrate the value of review articles for addressing societal grand challenges, provide specific solutions for addressing some of them and offer useful guidelines for how to improve review articles addressing societal grand challenges in the future.

## REVIEW ARTICLES AND SOCIETAL GRAND CHALLENGES

Management scholars have increasingly recognized the distinct nature and value of review articles<sup>3</sup> to make knowledge contributions (e.g., Kunisch et al., 2023; McMahān & McFarland, 2021; Rojon et al., 2021; Siddaway et al., 2019; Snyder, 2019). In general, this form of schol-

arly inquiry ‘employs scientific methods to analyse and synthesize prior research to develop new knowledge for academia, practice and policy-making’ (Kunisch et al., 2023: 5). Review articles can build an actionable knowledge base because they identify accumulated research on the same problem, thus overcoming the limitations of a single study (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006). In other words, they can ‘address research questions with a power that no single study has’ because they can ‘integrate findings and perspectives from many empirical findings’ (Snyder, 2019: 333). As such, review articles can widen the scope of a problem, combining knowledge from various streams of research across theories and research domains. In addition, review articles can reveal assumptions underlying bodies of knowledge. In short, review articles play a key role in producing new knowledge, which we argue is *sine qua non* for MOS scholarship to help address societal grand challenges.

Review articles can help address societal grand challenges through three distinct but related roles: (1) advancing *theoretical knowledge*; (2) advancing *practical knowledge*; and (3) advancing *methodological knowledge*. The articles in this special review issue exemplify these roles. It is important to note that these three roles are not mutually exclusive, because a single review can serve more than one role. For example, a review can accumulate evidence to inform policy and practice, as well as contribute to advancing conceptual knowledge. Likewise, a review can curate evidence to inform policy and generate insights related to methodological enhancements needed to build more credible and useful evidence. Further, a review article can also serve all three roles, as illustrated by George et al. (*in press*). Table 1 provides a preview and summary of these roles of review articles, which we elaborate next.

### Advancing theoretical knowledge

Review articles hold unique potential to make conceptual contributions with respect to societal grand challenges. This role emerges directly from the role of review articles in the broader scientific process. From an abstract perspective, the scientific process comprises several steps: scholars typically start with exploratory studies to collect information about the world and how things in the world interact. At some point scholars come up with theoretical explanations that are based on such exploratory research. Those explanations are tentative—they might or might not hold up under scrutiny. So, scholars conduct studies to test predictions made by theory. However, each study is bounded in its validity due to study designs and generalizability, with unavoidable research design and measurement trade-offs (Aguinis et al., 2023). Therefore, to provide an overarching picture, scholars use prior

<sup>2</sup> For example, an analysis of all review articles published in two leading management outlets for reviews—the *International Journal of Management Reviews* and the *Academy of Management Annals*—in the Scopus database in February 2023 revealed that only a small percentage of the reviews (10% and 4%, respectively) is relevant to the issues addressed by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

<sup>3</sup> In this article, we use the term ‘review articles’ to mean research papers that analyse and synthesize a stream of literature (e.g., related to theory, phenomenon, method, context and so on) for publication in academic journals.

TABLE 1 Summary of three roles of review articles in addressing societal grand challenges

Roles	Ways to approach this	Exemplary review articles (bold text used for articles in this special review issue)
Advancing theoretical knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clarifying key concepts</li> <li>2. Advancing programmatic theory and overarching frameworks</li> <li>3. Revealing onto-epistemological assumptions, ideologies, and values</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Societal grand challenges</b> (Seelos et al., 2023)</li> <li>• Motivations for environmental alliances (Niesten &amp; Jolink, 2020)</li> <li>• Public–private collaborations (George et al., <i>in press</i>)</li> <li>• <b>Employee green behaviour</b> (Tang et al., 2023)</li> <li>• Organizations and inequality (Amis et al., 2020; Bapuji et al., 2020)</li> <li>• Workplace aggression (Pinto, 2014)</li> <li>• <b>Framing circular economy</b> (Patala et al., 2023)</li> <li>• Mental unhealth in work and organizations (Thanem &amp; Elraz (2022)</li> <li>• Female entrepreneurship (Dean et al., 2019)</li> <li>• Epistemic oppression of feminist research in mainstream MOS journals (Bell et al., 2020)</li> </ul>
Advancing methodological knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Scrutinizing trustworthiness and generalizability of existing knowledge</li> <li>2. Providing guidance for research practices</li> <li>3. Enabling new research methods</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Replication and generalizability of research findings from archival data (Delios et al., 2022)</li> <li>• Employee well-being and organizational performance (Van de Voorde et al., 2012)</li> <li>• <b>Responsible research principles</b> (Seelos et al., 2023)</li> <li>• Drawing scholarly attention to climate change (Nyberg &amp; Wright, 2022)</li> <li>• <b>Literature selection for MOS knowledge related to the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals</b> (Berrone et al., 2023)</li> <li>• Feminist research to complement 'malestream' knowledge (Bell et al., 2020)</li> </ul>
Advancing practical knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Consolidating knowledge for practice and policymaking</li> <li>2. Reflecting on utilization of knowledge</li> <li>3. Translating and contextualizing extant knowledge</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Caste in international business (Bapuji et al., 2023)</li> <li>• Global refugee crisis (Guo et al., 2020)</li> <li>• Big societal challenges in human resource management research (Hughes &amp; Dundon, <i>in press</i>)</li> <li>• <b>Tackling United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals</b> (Berrone et al., 2023)</li> <li>• Business case for corporate social responsibility (Carroll et al., 2010)</li> <li>• Public–private collaborations (George et al., <i>in press</i>)</li> <li>• Distributed leadership in health and social care (Currie &amp; Lockett, 2011)</li> </ul>

studies as data and conduct activities such as research syntheses, meta-analyses and scientific curation. This ability to provide an overarching picture makes review articles an important tool to address societal grand challenges.

There are several ways review articles can make theoretical contributions in the context of societal grand challenges. To illustrate these possibilities, we discuss three types of contribution below: advancing key concepts, developing overarching frameworks and revealing onto-epistemological assumptions. As we will explain, three articles in this special issue—Patala et al. (2023), Seelos et al. (2023) and Tang et al. (2023)—provide examples for this role.

## Clarifying key concepts

Concepts, and the relationships between them, play a key role in developing knowledge about societal grand challenges. A lack of clarity impedes progress in research. When it comes to empirical research, lack of conceptual clarity undermines construct validity (Rousseau et al., 2008). While concepts play a key role in any form of research, they are particularly important in case of grand challenges, because conceptual confusion can lead to developing solutions that are either inadequate or ill-suited to address a societal problem.

The article by Seelos et al. (2023) provides an example: it focuses on the concept of societal problems and the scope of associated phenomena and attributes in MOS. Based on a systematic review of 'scholarly articles, calls for papers and editorial notes published in management journals', the authors uncovered 'three prominent conceptual architectures in use: discursive, family resemblance and phenomenon driven'. In a provocative conclusion, they recommend the retirement of the concept: 'Our analysis of the theoretical and empirical content of the (societal) GC concept in management scholarship on GC exposed unnoticed variation in assumptions, perspectives and approaches that management scholars adopted. We conclude that current efforts to conceptualize (societal) GC do not support systematic theory development and that the concept primarily accumulates disparate phenomena as empirical referents.' This seems not very surprising, given that this concept aims to capture a broad range of societal problems, for example, as illustrated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## Developing overarching frameworks

Review articles can develop overarching frameworks to combine knowledge from individual studies to develop 'programmatically theory'<sup>4</sup> (Aguinis & Cronin, *in press*; Cronin et al., 2021). Thereby, review articles can help produce new knowledge about societal grand challenges. To this end, Muthukrishna and Henrich (2019) recently argued that whereas the 'replication crisis facing the psychological sciences is widely regarded as rooted in methodological or statistical shortcomings', '... a large part of the problem is the lack of a cumulative theoretical framework or frameworks. Without an overarching theoretical framework that generates hypotheses across diverse domains, empirical programs spawn and grow from personal intuitions and culturally biased folk theories' (p. 221). In a similar vein, advancing overarching frameworks in MOS could help tackle societal grand challenges.

An example for this can be found in Tang et al. (2023). This review article focusses on employee green behaviour, seen as an essential part of organizational solutions to tackle the challenge of developing a sustainable economy and society. The authors sought to advance theoretical and empirical research by developing an ecosystem-inspired framework. Clarifying that 'an ecosystem refers to the

unity of biology and environment in a certain space of the nature in which organisms and the environment interact and restrict each other to maintain a relatively dynamic balance at a particular period of time'. The authors argued 'that the workplace is like an ecosystem made up of different values and personal characteristics of individual employees that interact with work contexts and other players (i.e., leaders, colleagues, customers)'. The framework enabled the authors to evaluate the state of extant research and to provide a programmatic perspective by specifying assumptions for future theorization and empirical work.

## Revealing onto-epistemological assumptions, ideologies and values

Review articles can dig deeper into the onto-epistemological assumptions held by the authors and ask questions that help to better curate the evidence beyond what is written in the articles or books and other forms of research output. These questions include: What is the historic context surrounding the work? What are the assumptions of reality held by the authors? For example, the assumption of self-interest in agency theory (Jensen & Meckling, 1976) led to theories of control that may have served as self-fulfilling prophecies and resulted in an empirical world captured in the published empirical studies (Ghoshal, 2005). The focus of the theory is to prevent self-interest of others from hurting the firm, with firm ownership defined narrowly as the owners or shareholders. Friedman (1970) proposed a doctrine whereby maximizing profit for shareholders is the primary purpose of the firm. A doctrine is an ideology and is neither a theory nor an empirical fact. Such ideology led to theories of the firm that skewed value distribution in favour of shareholders and their agents, allowed the exploitation of natural and human resources and relieved the firm from any responsibility for producing harmful externalities like inequality or global warming (Bapuji et al., 2018).

The literature reviews on persistent societal grand challenges (those that have persisted for a long time, such as inequality or poverty) may reveal an ideology that privileged certain dominant groups (e.g., shareholders, male, white, high class, upper caste, Global North and so on) who are also studied by MOS scholars. This ideology may have focused on economic performance for the benefit of some stakeholders at the expense of the well-being of other stakeholders (Tsui, 2013; Walsh et al., 2003). Further, this ideology may also have served to keep research on persistent grand challenges (which tend to be more sympathetic to less powerful stakeholders) out of the mainstream journals, at least until recently.

The article by Patala et al. (2023) provides an example of how a literature review can help to uncover those

<sup>4</sup> Scholars have also used other terms, such as 'unifying theory', 'unifying theoretical frameworks' and 'overarching frameworks' (e.g., Muthukrishna & Henrich, 2019) to refer to this. The underlying idea is that such efforts address a higher level and broader scope problem than those addressed by theoretical frameworks guiding a single study or a specific research question.

implicit ideologies. It focuses on the assumptions in extant research (and conceptualizations) about the circular economy, which play a significant role in shaping research fields. Their problematizing review surfaced various in-house assumptions about the circular economy (such as an emphasis on the business case for the circular economy and the relationship between the circular economy and corporate sustainability), root metaphor assumptions (circularity and industrial relationships resembling biological metabolisms) and the dominant ideological assumptions (neoliberalism and ecological modernization). Based on their analysis and drawing on the ongoing circular economy debates within broader environmental studies, the authors suggested novel research directions.

### Advancing methodological knowledge

A second role of review articles concerns research methods and practices in the context of grand challenges. Literature reviews play a critical role both in terms of reflecting on past and current practices, as well as helping improve research designs and methods-related practices in the future. Many journals publish literature reviews focused on methodological issues, which has resulted in a veritable explosion of methodological reviews summarizing best practices (Aguinis et al., 2023). These methodological literature reviews offer a one-stop reference for junior and senior researchers alike—as well as for reviewers and editors, who must be able to evaluate the credibility and transparency of methods described in submitted manuscripts. Therefore, review articles hold a unique potential related to research methods and practices for inquiries into societal grand challenges.

Review articles can advance methodological contributions to help address societal grand challenges in many ways, but to highlight this potential, we discuss three types of contribution below: evaluating trustworthiness and generalizability, providing guidance for research practices and enabling new research methods. As we will discuss, the articles by Patala et al. (2023) and Seelos et al. (2023) provide examples for this role. In addition, the article by Berrone et al. (2023) provides an example of novel search approaches in the context of review articles focused on societal grand challenges.

### Scrutinizing trustworthiness and generalizability of existing knowledge

Review articles are particularly useful for addressing societal grand challenges given the current debate about transparency, replicability and reproducibility in management research (Aguinis et al., 2018). Stated differently, address-

ing societal grand challenges credibly and convincingly requires state-of-the-science methodological approaches as described in the literature reviews, so that research results are trustworthy and useful for stakeholders inside and outside of the academy.

The review article by Van de Voorde et al. (2012) of the role of employee well-being in the relationship between human resource management and organizational performance provides an excellent example. In their review of the extant quantitative studies, the authors aimed to examine ‘whether study attributes such as the measurement of key variables, the level of analysis and the study design affect a study’s outcomes’ supporting one of the ‘two competing perspectives – ‘mutual gains’ or ‘conflicting outcomes’ (p. 391). This focus enabled them to uncover that “employee well-being in terms of happiness and relationship is congruent with organizational performance (mutual gains perspective), but that health-related well-being appears to function as a conflicting outcome” (p. 391).

### Providing guidance for research practices

Review articles can also help examine the existing knowledge, as well as research practices that are particularly relevant and useful for addressing societal grand challenges. In other words, all researchers need to master research methodology, regardless of the particular societal grand challenge they may wish to address (e.g., in a micro or macro domain), their particular ontological and epistemological perspectives (e.g., qualitative or quantitative), their career stage (e.g., junior or senior) and role in the research production process (e.g., author or reviewer/editor).

The article by Seelos et al. (2023) offers an example, despite provoking us to retire the concept of grand challenges. They acknowledge that the notion of (societal) grand challenges has ‘energized’ the MOS community to focus research efforts on societal problems. Therefore, they propose the application of specific principles that should guide future research on societal problems. The first of these principles is ‘urgency’, meaning that management scholars should finally face up to long-standing criticisms of their studies lacking practical relevance. The second is to leave the comfort zone and develop new theoretical perspectives that also transcend previous disciplinary boundaries. Finally, and more directly related to the points we make in this section, they suggest that the empirical subject area should be expanded, for example, with regard to empathic research of previously unconsidered stakeholder groupings.

Several other review articles provide examples: Jellema et al. (2022) conducted a review ‘of scholarly approaches to assessing the impact of certification standards for

sustainability' and provided guidance for 'designing impact-related sustainability studies' (p. 1042). In another review article, Rojon et al. (2021) focused on review methodology by assessing the state-of-the-art of systematic reviews in MOS. As another example, the review by Siedlok and Hibbert (2014) focused on the practices and opportunities of interdisciplinary research in management.

### Enabling new research methods

It is unlikely that researchers can study and offer solutions for grand challenges without the necessary resources for their methodological training and retooling. Towards this end, methodological literature reviews play a key role in summarizing state-of-the-science tools. For example, methodological innovations are accelerating due to new software, the speed of computers, the availability of Big Data and the availability of new sources of qualitative and quantitative data (Hill et al., 2022). Together, these innovations mean that researchers need to expand and update their methodological toolkits on an ongoing basis, which review articles can facilitate. Also, addressing societal grand challenges does not mean that only reviews of novel methods are useful. On the contrary, although many reviews have addressed methodologies that are quite novel and under-utilized in management research, such as thought experiments (Aguinis et al., *in press-a*; Hachigian, *in press*), others address qualitative and quantitative methods that have been in use for decades, such as meta-analysis (Steel et al., 2021), among many others.

The article by Berrone et al. (2023) offers a noteworthy example with respect to the review methodology. The authors used the predefined filters in the Scopus database that maps scientific publications to SDGs (Bordignon, 2021) for selecting the articles for their review. This approach could be used in future reviews focused on societal grand challenges. As another example, George et al. (*in press*) conducted a theory-guided review to consolidate the existing knowledge about the role of public-private partnerships in addressing societal problems. Based on their review, they advanced a rich research agenda on when, why and how public and private collaborations matter, and their implications for addressing societal challenges, which includes a number of suggestions focused on empirical opportunities related to data, measures and methods.

### Advancing practical knowledge

A third role of review articles relates to advancing knowledge for practice and policymaking. Policymakers, as well

as corporate practitioners, are under increasing pressure to justify their actions as well-reasoned and rational. Particularly in view of the complexity of societal grand challenges, potentially contradictory consequences of action must be carefully weighed against each other. In this context, review articles can help practice and policymaking by advancing practical knowledge, consolidating extant management and organization knowledge, reflecting on its utilization and translating and contextualizing it. As we explain below, the article by Berrone et al. (2023) provides an example.

### Consolidating knowledge for practice and policymaking

Review articles in MOS can offer knowledge synthesis that can lead to practices and policies to address societal grand challenges. This role relates to evidence-based practices (e.g., Rousseau et al., 2008; Tranfield et al., 2003) that first emerged in medicine to integrate the experience of the clinician, the values of the patient and the best available scientific information to guide clinical management. Systematic reviews of published research studies played a major role in the evaluation of particular treatments by assessing the quality of evidence and categorizing treatment as (1) likely to be beneficial, (2) likely to be harmful or (3) without (or insufficient) evidence to support either benefit or harm (Barends & Rousseau, 2018; Rousseau et al., 2008).

Notably, review articles often reveal that the empirical findings about certain phenomena are inconsistent; quite a few reviews of empirical studies end with unclear conclusions. Further efforts are needed to resolve the inconsistencies—be it by contextualizing the research results (for a recent example, see Wang, 2023), creating larger and more representative samples, applying different and better statistical methods, theoretically linking inconsistent findings, developing precise empirical operationalizations (Miller et al., 2013) or replicating the studies in a transparent and comprehensible manner (Bergh et al., 2017).

### Reflecting on utilization of knowledge

Management and organization studies have generated a large body of knowledge which may help to address but also aggravate societal problems. Thus, review articles could focus on critical reflection through scientifically generated knowledge and theoretical explanations, bringing into play the insights of MOS. For example, the article by Berrone et al. (2023) elaborated how consultant recommendations can end up being superficial and even

lead managers in the wrong direction; confronting such recommendations with the state-of-the-art in research can help limit the risks associated with implementing such recommendations. The authors identified four general processes related to how organizations can embrace the SDGs, namely prioritizing them over strategic goals of firms, contextualizing them to firms' geographical and industrial contexts, collaborating with other organizations and stakeholders to make more impactful progress and innovating via capital investment and business process remodelling. Using these four processes, the authors curated the extant knowledge and provided a more grounded adoption model that has significant practical implications. By doing so, the authors aspired to 'strengthen the implementation protocols of consulting firms, non-profit organizations and civic institutions' and help them to assess the trade-offs their clients have to make in their attempts to address SDGs. The authors also concluded that '[e]ffective guidelines... need to consider how firms can establish the conditions for collaboration, especially in communities that may distrust firms' efforts to engage in SDGs'.

### Translating and contextualizing existing knowledge

Research on societal problems has been longstanding in MOS, although not always framed with the label of societal grand challenges. The boundaries of societal grand challenges are fuzzy, but arguably there has been a long history and growing volume of work on specific societal grand challenges, such as climate change, inequality and poverty, especially if we look in neighbouring disciplines, such as sociology, economics and political science.

Advancing knowledge that can be applied takes a long time because it requires collecting empirical evidence to iteratively develop, test and refine the theory before it can be applied with confidence. As societal grand challenges are often characterized by urgency, practice and policy cannot wait until such knowledge becomes available. However, review articles can translate knowledge that is established and apply it to emerging problems. A good example is an article by Van Bavel et al. (2020), which reviewed prior research on a variety of topics, assessed the quality of evidence and developed prescriptions relevant to handling the Covid-19 pandemic in a very swift fashion. Similarly, 'rapid reviews' offer the possibility to gather knowledge about an area where knowledge is growing fast. For example, creative industries faced significant challenges during Covid-19. To help them, a review article focusing on the survival of creative industries identified the key factors associated with survival, such as

adaptation and the use of digital capabilities (Khlystova et al., 2022).

## FUTURE AVENUES FOR REVIEW STUDIES

In this final section, we complement the previous discussion by delineating three considerations for future review articles in MOS aimed at addressing societal grand challenges. We inferred these insights based on the submissions to this special issue, as well as the reflections of the author team of this article.

### Spanning disciplinary boundaries

A first promising future avenue is to bridge disciplinary siloes. With very few exceptions, the submissions to this special issue focused on a narrow disciplinary area; although these review articles often highlight the fragmentation of research across many subdisciplines and publication outlets, few were really inter- and cross-disciplinary. Yet, a defining feature of societal grand challenges is that they cross disciplinary boundaries. Therefore, scholars should embrace this specific feature in review articles.

Although this applies to all forms of research in MOS (Siedlok & Hibbert, 2014), review articles offer particular opportunities for inter- and cross-disciplinary research on societal grand challenges, with one of the disciplines related to MOS and the others related to adjacent fields. The researcher may find it useful to review prior scholarship in related disciplines working on the same problem. For example, global warming and inequality have been studied in numerous disciplines. There is an opportunity for MOS researchers to join forces with scholars in other disciplines, such as engineering, biology, chemistry, marine, atmospheric, earth sciences, as well as the social science disciplines of sociology, psychology, education, political science and public policy, to facilitate cross-discipline learning and collaboration to tackle today's complex societal grand challenges. One implication of such cross-disciplinary review article projects is, of course, that the peer review process for journal submissions will also become more demanding and require multidisciplinary review teams.

### Engaging practitioners in review articles

A second promising future avenue is to involve practitioners (including businesspeople, as well as policymakers) in

the production of review articles, not simply as consumers but as co-producers of knowledge (Aguinis et al., 2022; Sharma & Bansal, 2020). For example, when Professor Stephanie Bertels described the challenges in partnering with practitioners in a systematic review about embedding sustainability in corporate culture, she discussed the ‘jingle and jangle problem’ (Bansal et al., 2012: 80). Bertels found that practitioners used words differently than did her research team, even with a word so common as ‘culture’. Rather than seeing the jingle/jangle as a problem, she saw it as an opportunity to think about the review differently. For example, she realized that in conducting the systematic review, she needed to not just look at the cultural variables that affected sustainability, but the actual practices that would influence how practitioners acted. She also realized that visuals were a far more effective way of communicating with practitioners than research-based jargon, which not only yielded new insights but also gave a widely used tool. Her systematic review and subsequent work have catalysed changes in hundreds of companies worldwide (see [www.embeddingproject.org](http://www.embeddingproject.org)).

Involving practitioners ensures impactful reviews and introduces new insights (Aguinis et al., 2022; Sharma & Bansal, 2020). Researchers and managers espouse different knowledge systems and action orientations. Researchers, at least in our traditional understanding, seek to build theory—abstract knowledge that can apply across different contexts on a narrowly defined question. Practitioners, on the other hand, want to know ‘what to do next’—context-specific knowledge on a broad question (Sharma & Bansal, *in press*). As Bertels proceeded with her review, she realized that researchers wanted to know *why* specific cultural variables contributed to sustainability (e.g., employee performance management), but managers wanted to know what specific practices to implement (e.g., *how* to design an employee performance management system). This practitioner orientation to action contributes to impactful systematic reviews, which is especially important for questions that affect large swaths of people in society. It is the application of the knowledge gathered in the systematic review that is often the most important reason for conducting a review.

Of course, involving practitioners in the systematic review presupposes democratic and fair processes in forming opinions—a kind of ‘ideal speech situation’ in which the ‘unconstrained constraint of the better argument’ alone applies, that is: there are equal chances of dialogue initiation and participation, equal chances of introducing and applying interpretive and argumentative schemes, freedom from domination and no deception of speech intentions (Habermas, 1984). Whether such ideal speech situations can exist is certainly questionable; a certain pragmatism is necessary (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007). In their

mutual perception, scientists and practitioners may speak different languages for the time being, and it may take some time and a lot of goodwill to empathize with each other and understand each other’s worldview.

## Using alternative review approaches

A third promising future direction is to use alternative review approaches for a variety of purposes, for example, reviews that serve ‘generative purposes’. Similarly, ‘scoping reviews’ and ‘gateway reviews’ are a special breed of review articles that address topics which are common in other fields but have not yet made their way into the MOS arena (Paré et al., 2015). Some examples include the review of the existing MOS research on climate change (Nyberg et al., 2022), public health (Park et al., 2022) and human rights (Schrempf-Stirling et al., 2022).

Grey literature reviews provide another example of alternative reviews approaches that could be useful for tackling societal grand challenges. Given that societal grand challenges are inherently cross- and interdisciplinary, it would be beneficial to conduct literature reviews even in areas where there is little MOS knowledge. Developing reviews on a topic that is less familiar to MOS, or difficult to define, means that we need to approach reviews differently (e.g., use more grey literature) (Adams et al., 2017). Such an approach often includes knowledge generated by practitioners and community members outside of academia. For example, Christensen et al. (2021) provided guidance on how to conduct a grey literature review about social work. In addition, for problems related to emergent societal grand challenges, the literature review would cover a shorter period and limited scope, given that the problems are new or recent. The researcher may not have a lot of past experience or tradition to draw upon, and thus may need to exercise more judgement in the process of conducting the review.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The term ‘societal grand challenges’ has stimulated self-reflection about the nature and goals of MOS research. In this article and special issue, we have turned the spotlight on the role of research articles in producing knowledge that can help tackle societal grand challenges. Review articles play three distinct but related roles that make them particularly useful for addressing societal grand challenges: (1) advancing *theoretical knowledge*; (2) advancing *methodological knowledge*; and (3) advancing *practical knowledge*. Articles in this special issue contribute to each of these roles and, therefore, demonstrate the value of

review articles for addressing societal grand challenges, provide specific solutions for addressing some of them, and offer useful guidelines for future review articles that aim to address societal grand challenges. Building on the strong foundations provided by the review articles in this special issue and those published elsewhere, we encourage scholars to strengthen the contributions of review articles to address societal grand challenges by (a) spanning disciplinary boundaries, (b) engaging practitioners and (c) using alternative review approaches.

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