

INTEGRATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY IN POLITICAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL POLICY: FRAMEWORK, APPLICATIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

Integrative Literature Review (ILR) represents a promising research methodology for development within political science and public policy scholarship, particularly when addressing complex issues involving multiple dimensions and diverse perspectives. This article analyses the methodological framework of ILR, distinguishing it from systematic review and narrative review approaches, and demonstrates its application in the context of multidimensional social policy analysis. Through narrative synthesis of peer-reviewed literature classified into thematic domains, this study evaluates ILR's capacity to integrate diverse findings. Findings demonstrate that ILR provides unique capabilities in integrating qualitative and quantitative literature, identifying patterns of convergence and divergence, and generating analytical frameworks for policy analysts. The implications of this article underscore that ILR is not merely a methodology for knowledge synthesis but also an analytical tool that facilitates evidence-informed policymaking with institutional reform purpose within contexts characterized by complex and multidimensional governance. This article contributes to enhancing methodological literacy among policy researchers and government practitioners, particularly in adopting research approaches that are systematic yet remain flexible in responding to the dynamics of contemporary policy issues.

Keywords: Integrative Literature Review; Research Methodology; Political Science; Public Policy; Diagnostic Framework

1. Introduction

The development of political science and public policy over the last decade has been marked by increasing complexity in the issues faced by researchers and practitioners. Problems such as multidimensional poverty alleviation, institutional reform, and sustainable development demand the integration of multiple disciplinary perspectives and research methodologies to achieve comprehensive understanding (Torraco, 2005; Trein et al., 2019). In this context, there is a need for a research methodology capable of accommodating such diversity while maintaining scientific rigor. The evolution of research methods in the social sciences reveals the dominance of two main approaches, empirical research (both qualitative and quantitative), which is context-specific, and narrative literature reviews, which tend to be descriptive and selective (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Labaree, 2009). The limitations of these approaches have motivated the search for a more systematic yet flexible methodological alternative.

The Integrative Literature Review (ILR) has emerged as a response to this methodological need (Hopia et al., 2016). Unlike systematic reviews, which focus on hypothesis testing through strict protocols, ILR adopts a more inclusive and generative stance that integrates qualitative and quantitative findings to produce conceptual syntheses and even new theoretical insights (Christmals & Gross, 2017; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005; Torraco, 2005). This approach is highly relevant when addressing multidimensional policy issues such as poverty, which includes economic, social, political, and environmental dimensions (Noyes et al., 2019). Furthermore, the global momentum toward evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM) requires methodological frameworks capable of bridging the gap between academic knowledge production and policy application, as empirical evidence is often fragmented or inaccessible to policymakers (Suazo-Galdames et al., 2025).

In the context of policy research, the application of ILR remains relatively limited, even though it has the potential to enhance methodological rigor, transparency, and the translation of academic findings into actionable policy frameworks (Snyder, 2019; Christmals & Gross, 2017). This article aims to provide a comprehensive exposition of ILR within political science and public policy through three key contributions: first, by clarifying its theoretical and methodological foundations; second, by demonstrating its practical application in analyzing complex policy issues; and third, by advancing disciplinary development through the strengthening of

methodological sophistication and the practical relevance of academic work for policy practitioners (Alvarenga et al., 2024).

2. Method

This article uses a narrative synthesis method to analyze and integrate research methodology literature relevant to ILR in the context of political science and public policy. It should be noted that while this article critiques the informal and selective approach of narrative reviews in the Background section, this article uses a fundamentally different narrative synthesis. The key difference between the two is that narrative reviews are non-systematic approaches to summarizing the literature with little protocol transparency and are susceptible to selective researcher bias (Labaree, 2009). In contrast, narrative synthesis is a systematic, transparent, and rigorous protocol-based approach to analyzing qualitative literature (Popay et al., 2006). Narrative synthesis has a clear operational framework, structured data extraction procedures, and reflexive mechanisms to minimize researcher bias. Thus, the use of narrative synthesis in this article is consistent with the argument in the Background that the research methodology used must be systematic and transparent.

Narrative synthesis is a systematic approach to analyzing and synthesizing findings from various literature sources by relying on the use of words, texts, and narratives to select, summarize, and explain diverse research results (Rodgers et al., 2009). Narrative synthesis adheres to the principle that complex knowledge can be presented through careful, systematic, and reflective narratives of texts, while maintaining methodological rigor. The choice of narrative synthesis as the method in this article is based on several considerations. First, narrative synthesis has the flexibility necessary to integrate literature from various sources and disciplines without sacrificing systematicity (Rodgers et al., 2009).

The literature on ILR methodology is scattered across journals, books, and academic repositories, with varying formats, depths, and perspectives. Narrative synthesis can accommodate this heterogeneity while still applying criteria appropriate to the needs of a literature review. Second, narrative synthesis is specifically designed to address complex research questions (Rodgers et al., 2009). This aligns with the research question of this article: How can the ILR methodological framework be explained, differentiated from other methods, operationalized in a public policy context, and contributed to policy research? Third, this method prioritizes clarity and appropriateness to the author's research needs in the synthesis process (Rai et al., 2020). Fourth, narrative synthesis has been widely adopted in public policy research making it a familiar, credible, and effective method (Greenhalgh et al., 2004).

3. Result and Discussion

Definition and Characteristics of Integrative Literature Review

The research methodology literature demonstrates a consistent definition of an integrative literature review, albeit with varying emphases depending on the disciplinary context. The most frequently cited definition is that an integrative literature review (ILR) is a form of research that summarizes, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated manner, resulting in a new framework and perspective on the topic (Torraco, 2005). This definition emphasizes the generative aspect of ILR, that the primary goal is not simply to summarize existing knowledge, but to create new knowledge through critical synthesis. Additional literature expands on this definition by emphasizing that ILR integrates findings from studies with diverse methodologies to achieve a comprehensive and holistic understanding of a particular phenomenon or problem (Russell, 2005; Whittemore et al., 2001).

An essential characteristic that emerges consistently across the literature is that ILRs have the unique capability to accommodate a diversity of research methodologies. Unlike systematic reviews, which are often limited to studies with a specific design, ILRs explicitly include qualitative, quantitative, theoretical literature, and even case studies (Dabney & Eid, 2024). The second characteristic is a holistic orientation. The goal of ILR is to develop a comprehensive understanding of a topic by synthesizing all available evidence, rather than simply identifying the effectiveness of a particular intervention (Russell, 2005). The third characteristic is a focus on developing new conceptual frameworks or theories. ILR is designed to generate new understandings and reconceptualizations, particularly when dealing with complex and multidimensional topics (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005). The fourth characteristic is the flexibility of the protocol. Although ILRs follow a systematic process, they are more flexible than systematic reviews, allowing for adjustments to the methodology based on the complexity of the literature encountered (Soares et al., 2014).

Perspectives in the literature also indicate a discussion about positioning ILR in terms of methodological rigor. Some literature positions ILR as a rigorous method comparable to a systematic review, albeit in different ways

(Aveyard & Bradbury-Jones, 2019) . Rigor in ILR is not achieved through extremely strict protocols and maximum standardization, but rather through transparency of the process, clear documentation, and researcher reflexivity in identifying and managing subjectivity. (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) . Meanwhile, another perspective emphasizes that ILR is more suitable for answering broader and more exploratory research questions, particularly in the context of developing evidence-based practices, than for rigorous hypothesis testing (Dabney & Eid, 2024)

Methodological Differences between Systematic Review and Narrative Review

The methodological literature identifies significant differences between Integrative Literature Reviews (ILR), Systematic Reviews (SR), and Narrative Reviews (NR) across various operational and philosophical dimensions. The primary difference lies in the protocol and methodological flexibility. Systematic reviews are characterized by a very strict protocol, with every methodological decision documented before the review begins (Siddaway et al., 2019) . In contrast, ILR follows a systematic but more flexible protocol, allowing for adjustments to the methodology during the review process if unexpected complexities are discovered in the literature (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) . On the other hand, narrative reviews have minimal protocols and are often informal, making them susceptible to undocumented selective bias and researcher subjectivity (Labaree, 2009) .

The second difference lies in the scope and inclusiveness of the research considered. Systematic reviews typically limit inclusion to studies with specific methodological designs, particularly experimental studies deemed to have high internal validity, such as randomized controlled trials (Briner & Denyer, 2012) . ILR explicitly includes research with diverse methodologies, such as experimental and non-experimental, qualitative and quantitative, and empirical and theoretical, to build a holistic understanding (Russell, 2005) . Narrative reviews are also inclusive of diverse methodologies, but their selection is often based on the researcher's subjective judgment without clear and transparent criteria.

The third difference lies in the purpose and output of the synthesis. Systematic reviews primarily aim to identify and evaluate the effectiveness of a specific intervention or program, with outputs often being meta-analyses or recommendations on best evidence (Siddaway et al., 2019) . However, ILRs aim to develop or test conceptual frameworks and generate new theories through critical syntheses that integrate diverse perspectives (Torraco, 2005) . Narrative reviews are more descriptive in nature and summarize existing knowledge on a topic without necessarily developing a new framework or testing a theory (Labaree, 2009) .

The fourth difference is transparency and reproducibility. Systematic reviews prioritize maximum transparency and reproducibility through pre-registering protocols, detailed documentation, and involving multiple reviewers with clear conflict of interest management (Briner & Denyer, 2012) . ILRs emphasize transparency in the process followed, but acknowledge that interpretation and synthesis still involve researcher judgment. Reproducibility is achieved through clear documentation of decisions made, rather than through maximum standardization (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) . On the other hand, Narrative Reviews are often not transparent enough about the process of selecting and analyzing literature.

The fifth difference concerns epistemological assumptions. Systematic reviews are based on the assumption that objective evidence can be identified through rigorous procedures and the minimization of bias (positivist epistemology). ILR adopts a more dynamic posture. ILR recognizes that complex knowledge is gained through synthesis that considers diverse contexts and perspectives while maintaining rigor through transparency and reflexivity (Whittemore & Knafl, 2005) . Narrative reviews are often less explicit about their underlying epistemology, making them vulnerable to methodological relativism. These five key dimensions can be visualized in the following comparison matrix:

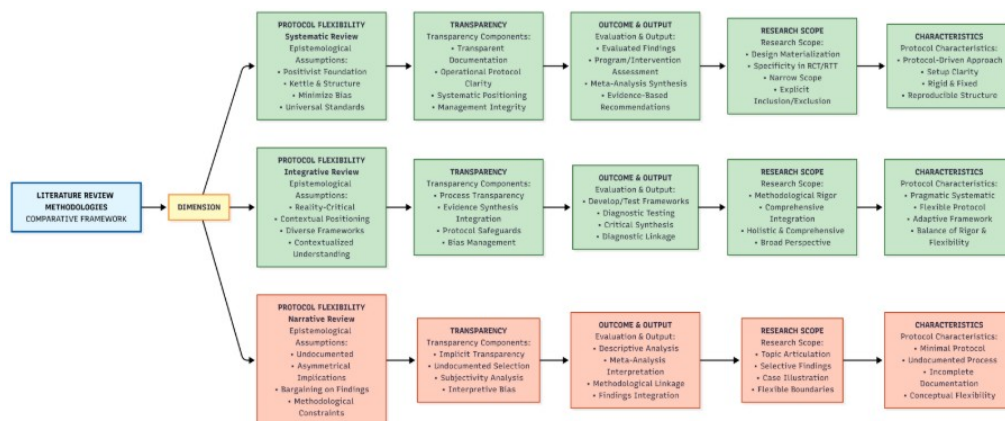


Figure 1. Methodological Comparison in Five Operational and Philosophical Dimensions

Source: Author's Synthesis of Briner & Denyer (2012) , Labaree (2009) , Russell (2005) , Siddaway et al. (2019) , and Whitemore & Knafl (2005)

ILR positions itself as a methodology that maintains robust systematicity and transparency. It is similar to a systematic review, but with greater flexibility to accommodate the complexity and diversity of the literature analyzed. This makes ILR potentially suitable for policy research involving multidimensional and multidisciplinary questions.

Operational Framework for Integrative Literature Review

The ILR methodology literature demonstrates significant consensus on the operational steps to follow in conducting an ILR, although there is variation in nomenclature and detail. The most influential frameworks come from Whitemore & Knafl (2005) and Torraco (2005) , which provide a structured process for conducting an ILR. The first stage, universal across all frameworks, is problem formulation or problem identification. This stage involves formulating a clear, specific, and significant research question and developing an initial theory or conceptual framework that will guide the entire review (Whitemore & Knafl, 2005) . Critical to this stage is not only identifying knowledge gaps but also articulating why they matter and how the ILR will address them (Torraco, 2005) .

Literature searches in ILR employ systematic, transparent approaches across academic databases using comprehensive search strategies (Whitemore & Knafl, 2005) , though more pragmatic coverage is acceptable compared to Systematic Reviews provided documentation of databases, search strings, inclusion-exclusion criteria, and results remains rigorous. Subsequent stages involve screening studies based on methodological clarity, relevance, and potential conceptual contribution (Whitemore & Knafl, 2005) , followed by quality assessment recognizing that rigor encompasses not only internal validity but also trustworthiness, credibility, and contextual relevance. Data organization through structured extraction matrices enables systematic comparison across studies, with coding and categorization identifying patterns of convergence, divergence, and contradiction (Torraco, 2005) . Pattern synthesis integrates diverse findings into coherent frameworks that answer research questions, emphasizing explicit reasoning to ensure conclusions remain grounded in source literature (Whitemore & Knafl, 2005) . Final dissemination communicates findings to relevant audiences through clear written reports or articles designed to maximize clarity and impact on research and practice (Whitemore & Knafl, 2005) . Methodological literature demonstrates substantial consensus regarding these operational stages, though terminology and procedural detail vary, establishing a structured yet flexible framework for conducting ILR:



Figure 2. Stages and Operational Framework of Integrative Literature Review

Source: Author's Synthesis of Whitemore & Knafl (2005) and Torraco (2005)

Each stage in this framework has specific operational activities designed to ensure that reviews are conducted systematically, transparently, and produce outputs that contribute to the development of knowledge in the research area.

Integrative Literature Review Application

The application of ILR in the context of political science and public policy research still has limitations compared to health studies (Torraco, 2005; Whitemore & Knafl, 2005) . However, the author will provide examples of how ILR is applied in political science and public policy research. For example, research on social policy must address complex, multidimensional issues and involve various stakeholders. Some interesting topics for research include the evaluation of poverty alleviation policies, the analysis of education reform programs that consider perspectives from the economics of education, the sociology of education, and public administration, and the study of governance and institutional reform that integrates literature from political science, sociology, and public administration.

The unique capability of ILR lies in integrating literature across various disciplines without prioritizing one perspective over another. For example, in the analysis of poverty alleviation policies, researchers can integrate perspectives from political science, economics, sociology, and public administration without having to choose one perspective as more valid than the others (Russell, 2005) . This integration allows for identification of how various dimensions interact and reinforce each other in shaping policy effectiveness. For example, in a complex and

multidimensional social policy analysis, this integration of multidisciplinary perspectives can be visualized as follows:

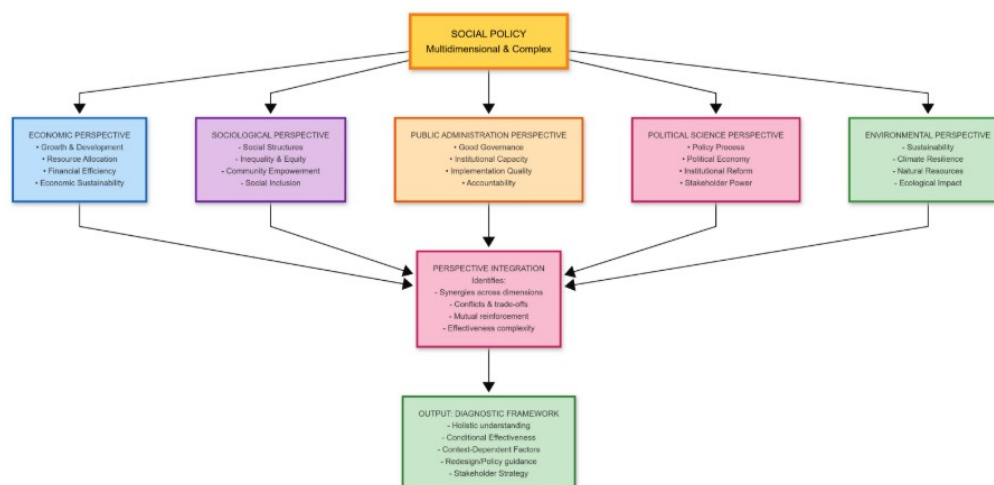


Figure 3. Integration of Multidisciplinary Perspectives in Social Policy Analysis Using Integrative Literature Review

Source: Author's Synthesis of Torraco (2005) , Whitemore & Knaf1 (2005) , and Russell (2005)

Figure 3 explains that social policy analysis requires a simultaneous understanding of multiple perspectives: economics, which understands resource distribution; sociology, which understands social structure; public administration, which understands implementation and governance; political science, which understands policy processes and stakeholder interests; and environmental studies, which understands sustainability and resilience. The integration of these five perspectives produces a comprehensive and actionable diagnostic framework for policy redesign. The results of ILR applications in policy research tend to be diagnostic frameworks or conceptual models that can be used to analyze the complexity of policy issues, identify enabling and limiting factors to policy effectiveness, and provide diagnoses of why certain policies succeed in some contexts but fail in others (Whitemore & Knaf1 2005; Trein et al., 2023). These frameworks have practical value for policy redesign because they provide a holistic understanding of the factors that need to be considered in policy reform.

Methodology for Literature Review Research in Political Science and Public Policy

ILR offers distinctive contributions to understanding policy research methodology through integrating multidisciplinary literature and generating diagnostic frameworks for policy analysts. Its integrative capability addresses knowledge fragmentation inherent in academic landscapes where complex policy issues span multiple disciplines. Complex policy phenomena such as poverty reduction involve integrated questions spanning political science (policy actors and decision-making), economics (growth and resource allocation), sociology (social structures), public administration (governance and institutional capacity), and environmental studies (sustainability and climate resilience). ILR's comprehensive search protocols and inclusive criteria enable policy researchers to synthesize multidisciplinary literature across dispersed databases and journals within a single analytical framework (Kennedy et al., 2019) , not merely accumulating perspectives but creating syntheses that identify how different approaches interact, reinforce, or contradict each other.

ILR's capacity to identify convergence, divergence, and contradiction patterns across evidence provides critical value for policy analysis (Kennedy et al., 2019) . Convergence is where diverse studies across contexts and methodologies demonstrate consistent findings: establishes generalized confidence in policy effects; divergence signals context-dependent or conditional effectiveness; contradiction directs deeper investigation into methodological, population, or contextual sources of disagreement. Understanding when, where, and why policies work remains fundamental to evidence-informed policymaking. Most significantly, ILR produces diagnostic frameworks enabling policy researchers and practitioners to analyze policy complexity and identify barriers and opportunities for improvement. Unlike Systematic Reviews that recommend interventions proven effective, ILR generates more nuanced frameworks explaining how interventions succeed in specific contexts with particular conditions, fail in others, and identifying institutional and structural factors explaining variation (Snyder, 2019) . This analytical and practical value provides researchers and practitioners diagnostic lenses for understanding policy complexity within their own contexts and identifying what changes or adaptations enable policy effectiveness. The figure below shows how ILR is capable of identifying patterns or policy research:

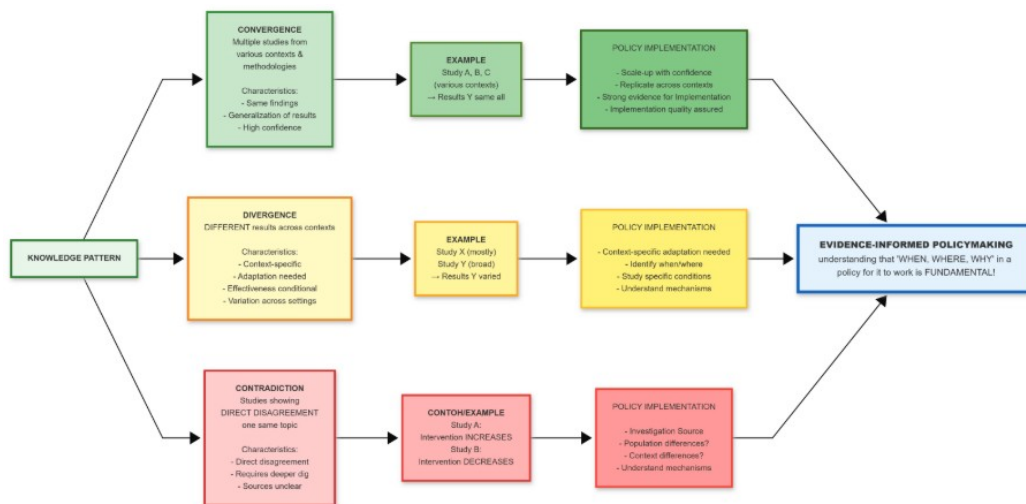


Figure 4. Integrative Literature Review Diagnostic Framework

Source: Author's Synthesis of Kennedy et al. (2019) and Whitemore & Knafel (2005)

The pattern identified in the figure demonstrates ILR's unique capability in identifying three patterns of knowledge in the literature and translating them into practical implications. Convergence provides strong evidence for implementation with high confidence. Divergence indicates that policy effectiveness depends on the specific context. Contradictions indicate the need for deeper investigation into the sources of differences. A sophisticated understanding of these three patterns is fundamental to evidence-informed policymaking.

Overcoming Subjectivity and Building Credibility

There are three fundamental principles in ILR: alignment, rigor, and transparency (Daniel et al., 2025) . Alignment refers to the relationship between the research question, the chosen methodology, and the research design, meaning that the choice of ILR must be justified by the research question and context that demands the appropriate flexibility offered by ILR. The strength of ILR is achieved through systematic management of subjectivity and transparency about how subjectivity is managed (Johnson et al., 2020) refer to the concept of trustworthiness which includes credibility, transferability, rigor, and well-confirmed. These principles of trustworthiness can be applied in ILR through: (1) explicit articulation of the initial theory and assumptions that guide the literature review; (2) detailed data documentation of each methodological decision and the rationale behind it; (3) iterative and critical engagement with the literature, including an active search for conflicting evidence; (4) reflexivity about the researcher's position and potential biases; and (5) peer review or external validation of the data obtained (Johnson et al., 2020)

Transparency in ILR involves openly detailing each stage of the literature review process, starting with the databases used, the search strategy (in the search/query string) applied, the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the data extraction procedures, the analysis methods, and the specific decisions made during the literature review process by the researcher (Daniel et al., 2025) . This transparency allows readers to audit the literature review process, evaluate the credibility of the findings, and assess their applicability to their own contexts. Furthermore, transparency can facilitate reproducibility, allowing other researchers to follow the process and evaluate whether they reach the same conclusions or arrive at different conclusions based on their own rationale.

The combination of alignment, rigor, and transparency creates a robust framework for evaluating and enhancing the credibility of ILR. The practical implication is that the quality of ILR cannot be evaluated solely on the formal characteristics of the protocol (how rigorous? how standardized?), but also on its substance: are the research questions, design, and execution truly aligned? Are systematic efforts made to maintain trustworthiness? Is there sufficient transparency for audit and evaluation? This trustworthiness principle can be operationalized through five specific, interrelated mechanisms, as illustrated below:

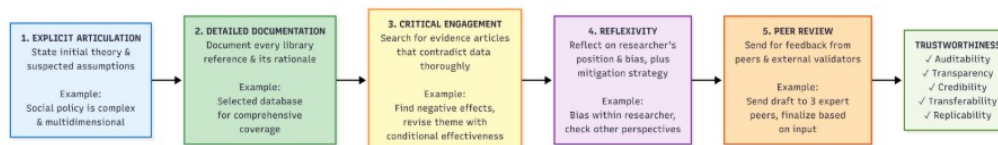


Figure 5. Trustworthiness Implementation Mechanism in Integrative Literature Review

Source: Author's Synthesis of Johnson et al. (2020) and Daniel et al. (2025)

The figure shows that trustworthiness in ILR is built through a series of interrelated and mutually reinforcing mechanisms. Each mechanism has a specific function. The first mechanism builds the foundation by ensuring that initial theory and assumptions are clear. The second mechanism creates transparency through detailed documentation. The third mechanism protects against confirmation bias. The fourth mechanism acknowledges and manages researcher subjectivity. The fifth mechanism provides corrections to external parties. Together, these five mechanisms create a comprehensive framework to ensure that ILR is not only flexible but also credible, auditable, and high-quality.

Implications for Evidence-Informed Policymaking

The contribution of ILR to evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM), academics, policy analysts, and other stakeholders is crucial in the context of policy research. The literature on EIPM identifies that the gap between academic knowledge and policy practice is a structural problem that cannot be resolved solely through empirical research or the publication of periodic reports. It also requires a serious approach to translating the knowledge into accessible, relevant, and actionable formats for policy-making stakeholders (Toomey et al., 2022) .

ILR contributes to the knowledge translation process in several ways. First, by integrating multidisciplinary literature, ILR inherently adopts a perspective that is more attuned to the complexity and multidimensionality of policy problems than a single discipline (Strydom et al., 2010). This facilitates a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of policy issues that are often inaccessible through a single disciplinary lens. Second, it generates a diagnostic framework that identifies the conditional factors and contextual interrelationships in policy effectiveness. ILR provides policymakers with insights to evaluate the relevance and feasibility of a policy problem they face. This aligns with the principles of knowledge translation, which emphasize the importance of contextual adaptation in policy implementation (Toomey et al., 2022) .

Third, ILR's ability to identify knowledge gaps and contradictions in the literature can directly inform research agendas and identify where additional research is most needed to address gaps that limit policymakers' ability to make informed decisions (Toronto, 2020). In the context of participatory or collaborative approaches to knowledge translation, ILR frameworks and syntheses can serve as starting points for dialogue between researchers and policymakers, facilitating more substantive and evidence-based discussions about policy options (Tosun & Lang, 2017).

While ILR presents significant potential to support EIPM, realizing this potential requires more than simply "doing good ILR." It is also crucial to consider knowledge translation strategies to ensure that ILR findings are effectively communicated and accessible to policy stakeholders. This includes explicit engagement with policy stakeholders at various stages from review (not just socialization), careful selection of output formats (policy briefs, interactive tools, etc.), and partnerships with institutions or networks of policy-related actors.

4. Conclusions

Integrative Literature Review is a research methodology with potential for development in political science and public policy, particularly for analyzing complex, multidimensional policy issues involving diverse perspectives from different disciplines. Through its unique capabilities in integrating qualitative and quantitative literature, identifying patterns of convergence and divergence, and generating actionable diagnostic frameworks, ILR offers significant methodological contributions that cannot be achieved by Systematic Reviews or Narrative Reviews.

While the flexibility of ILR makes it more susceptible to researcher subjectivity than Systematic Reviews, this vulnerability can be managed through transparency, detailed documentation, and robust reflexivity, thus maintaining robustness without sacrificing its ability to accommodate the complexity of multidisciplinary knowledge. ILR's contribution to evidence-informed policymaking is also significant, providing policymakers with a holistic understanding and diagnostic framework for evaluating specific contexts and identifying the conditional factors that influence policy effectiveness.

Although the use of ILR in politics and policy research remains limited due to epistemological, practical, and institutional challenges, serious efforts to improve methodological literacy, develop researchers' capacity, and provide formal recognition to ILR in academic standards can accelerate the methodology's adoption. Thus, this article contributes to an increased understanding of ILR among political science and public policy researchers by building a foundation for broader and higher-quality application of ILR in analyzing the complexities of political science and public/social policy.

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