**Structure of an HR Article**

Most HR articles have something along the lines of the following structure. Although this example focuses on empirical, primary studies; the structure would be similar (with some notable tweaks) for other types of articles (e.g., meta-analyses, literature reviews).

**I. Introduction** – The purpose of this section is to set up the study for the reader. This section focuses on describing the phenomenon, why it is important to study, what the present study does and why it provides an important contribution, what is already known about the phenomenon and how this study will advance what is known, and developing hypotheses. Average length of an introduction is approximately 10-15 pages. An introduction will typically include all, or most of, the following sections in the following order.

**1. Opening Section (pgs. 3-6 in Allen et al.)** – This section is typically 3-5 pages long and briefly describes the following to the reader: (a) the phenomenon being studied and what is known about it; (b) what is not known about the phenomenon, what is missing; (c) why that missing information is important and should be known; (d) how this study will address that gap; and (e) how this study makes an important contribution beyond what is already known (i.e., advances understanding in an important way). This section doesn’t provide all study details to the reader (that is what the rest of the paper is for); it just gives a general idea of what this study does and why. It is the section that is intended to “hook” the reader in and make them want to read the rest of your paper.

- You should be able to write this section before you even carry out the study. I think it is a good exercise to at least try to put together an outline of this section when you are coming up with a research idea. If you are having trouble making a convincing case for any of (a) through (e) above, you have to ask whether your study is worth doing.

- This section is where you make the case for your study’s contribution. See the end of this document for some thoughts on what does and doesn’t make for a significant contribution in HR.

**2. Providing Background/Context (pgs. 7-9 in Allen et al.)** – This section is as long as it needs to be (usually about 3-5 pages, though) and is intended to provide relevant context to the reader on your topic. It may include any or all of the following: background, definition of constructs, literature review, and/or description of theoretical framework.

- This section will almost always start with some text defining the constructs being studied. For example, Allen et al. used this section to get into “what is ‘job embeddedness’?”

- If there is background information that the reader needs to know (e.g., some context [historical, societal, organizational] relevant to the study phenomenon) it should be described. This may or may not be needed, depending on the topic.

- If there are relevant past studies on your topic, or related topics, they should be reviewed in this section. This situates your study in the literature on your topic. It tells the reader what is known about the phenomenon from previous studies and what is still not known (i.e., the gap your study is going to fill). For example, Allen et al. used this section to review relevant studies on job embeddedness. \*\*\*Sometimes, some or all of this may go in the next section on “Hypothesis and/or Research Question Development.”

- If your study uses a theoretical framework (e.g., social exchange theory, conservation of resources theory) to develop your hypotheses, it should be described in this section. \*\*\*Sometimes, some or all of this may go in the next section on “Hypothesis and/or Research Question Development.”

- No matter what is included in the “Providing Background/Context” section, it is important to make clear to readers why it is relevant. For example, for each study that is reviewed in the literature review, make it clear why that study is *relevant to your study*. Or, if you are describing a theory, make clear why that theory is important for your study and connect its ideas to your study. Don’t just review the literature or describe the theory in a vacuum and expect the reader to make the relevant connections.

**3. Hypothesis and/or Research Question (RQ) Development (pgs. 9-14 in Allen et al.)** – This is usually the longest section of the Introduction (typically 5-10 pages) and is where you present the logical, conceptual, theoretical, and/or empirical arguments leading up to each of your hypotheses or RQs. Each hypothesis/RQ typically gets its own subsection (e.g., a couple of pages making the argument for Hypothesis 1, then a couple of pages making the argument for Hypothesis 2, and so on).

- Present hypotheses if you can make a strong case (i.e., an “educated guess”) for what will happen (e.g., there will be a relationship between X and Y). Present research questions if you do not know what will happen or if there are multiple possibilities (e.g., is there a relationship between X and Y?).

- This section may include arguments for your hypotheses/RQs that are based on theoretical frameworks (e.g., Allen et al. drew upon conservation of resources and power dependence theories).

- This section may include empirical arguments for your hypotheses/RQs (i.e., reviewing what previous studies have found in order to make the case for your hypotheses/RQs). For example, Allen et al. cited many studies throughout this section to support the ideas they were presenting leading up to their hypotheses.

- Sometimes there may not be relevant theory or prior research to support your arguments (e.g., you’re studying a new topic that has never been studied before). In that case, this section would include logical or conceptual arguments for hypotheses/RQs; you are essentially creating new theory.

- In any case, somewhere in this section you should explicitly state your hypotheses/RQ.

**II. Methods** – This section is as long as it needs to be (typically about 5 pages) and describes the methodological details of your study. In a primary study, it will generally include three major subsections: Participants and Procedure, Measures, and Analyses. A meta-analysis would have different subsections (e.g., how the literature search was done, how studies were coded, and how the analyses were carried out; note that these are essentially the meta-analytic analogs to the three subsections in a primary study).

**1. Participants and Procedure (pgs. 14-15 in Allen et al.)** – This section describes the participants in your study and the general procedure for your study (i.e., what participants were asked to do). It should include information about what they do (e.g., students, employees), their organization(s), demographic details (e.g., age, sex, tenure), and how they were sampled (e.g., MTurk, a lab study in a university, a field study in an organization). It should also describe how the study was carried out (e.g., Allen described the general procedures/steps in their study in the second paragraph of their “Sample and Procedure” section).

**2. Measures (pgs. 15-17 in Allen et al.)** – Describe how you measured each of your variables. If you used surveys, cite the source of the survey or how it was developed, provide sample items, and provide a reliability estimate. If you include control variables, provide a justification for each control variable.

**3. Analyses (combined with “Results” in Allen et al.)** – This section describes how statistical analyses were carried out. For example, if you used structural equation modeling, describe the steps you used in the analyses and any special software that was used (e.g., on page 18 Allen et al. described how they carried out their moderator analyses using the PROCESS macro). Sometimes, as in Allen et al., this section can be combined with the “Results” section.

**III. Results (pgs. 17-18 in Allen et al.)** – This section is often (but, not always) fairly short (a few pages) and describes the outcomes of your statistical analyses.

- It often begins with a short section that provides descriptive statistics (means and SDs) and intercorrelations for all study variables and/or confirmatory factor analyses to provide support for the study’s model (e.g., showing that all of your study variables load onto their own separate factors instead of some of them loading onto common factors, which would suggest those measures are not separable). For example, this is what they’re doing in the first paragraph of the Results section in Allen et al.

- Then, the results of inferential statistics testing your hypotheses/RQs are presented. This is what Allen et al. are doing on page 18.

- To the extent possible, try to be purely descriptive in the Results section, and leave implications of the results for the Discussion section.

- If your results are in Tables/Figures, be sure to reference them for the reader.

- Be sure to explicitly state whether each hypothesis/RQ was supported and what the statistical evidence for that support was.

**IV. Discussion** – This is one of the longer sections (typically 5-10 pages) and is used for discussing the takeaway messages from the results, theoretical and/or practical implications of results, study limitations, and directions for future research. These typically each get their own subsections.

- Note that Allen et al. included two studies, so they had short discussion sections after each study, and then a longer, “General Discussion” section. Everything I’ve written here about Discussion sections applies most directly to their “General Discussion” section.

- A general piece of advice about Discussion sections: Discussion sections can “go off the rails” when authors start opining about all sorts of implications that are tangentially related to their study results, but that their study did not directly and explicitly demonstrate or test. Stick to discussing only those things that are clearly and directly tested/demonstrated in your study. This will typically only be a few major things.

**1. Takeaway Messages (first paragraph of General Discussion in Allen et al.)** – Most Discussion sections start with a short section that summarizes the important takeaway messages from the results.

**2. Theoretical Implications (pgs. 30-32 of Allen et al.)** – This section is used for discussing the theoretical implications of your study (i.e., what important things did we learn from this study?). All of the promises about “contribution” that you made in the opening section of the manuscript (hopefully) get realized in this section and the section on “Practical Implications.”

- If your study tested or extended aspects of a theoretical framework, this is where you would discuss the implications of what you found.

- If your study significantly advanced knowledge/scholarship on your topic, this is where you would discuss how it did so.

- If your study has implications for how researchers should think about your study topic (e.g., your study results add to, or change, a conversation happening in the scholarly literature about this topic), this is where you would describe this for readers.

**3. Practical Implications (pgs. 33-34 in Allen et al.)** – All OB articles should have practical implications for organizations and/or organization members; this is the section where you discuss them. Use this section to discuss what organizations, managers, and/or employees should do differently based on your study results.

**4. Limitations and Directions for Future Research (pgs. 34-36 in Allen et al.)** – No study is perfect. All studies have at least some limitations and boundary conditions that future research could address. This is where you discuss these issues. Sometimes, as in Allen et al., these are split into two separate sections, but I typically combine them into one because future research can address your study’s limitations.

- Try to think of what the most critical and skeptical reviewer in the world would say about your study. This is your opportunity to acknowledge those limitations and make a case for why your study still has value. Be honest and conservative in the claims you make in this section; don’t get defensive.

- There are always going to be some valid criticisms of your study (e.g., your sample is not completely representative, you could not test whether your results would hold in another context). Acknowledge these limitations and what they mean for your study conclusions, and suggest that future research should investigate these issues.

- Another way I often see Discussion sections “go off the rails” is in study authors listing too many “directions for future research.” Sometimes they will go on for page after page about follow-up studies that could be done. If your “future research” section is more than a couple of pages long, it is likely you are getting too far afield from the direct implications your study has for future research (i.e., what is the next study or two that would be logical follow-ups/extensions to your study?).

**5. Conclusion (pg. 36 in Allen et al.)** – Most Discussion sections will end with a short (usually only about a paragraph long) section that highlights some of the study’s main conclusions. Honestly, the content of this section is usually redundant with other sections of the Discussion section (particularly, the “Takeaway Messages” section), but ending the paper with some limitation or suggestion for a future research study often seems too abrupt. So, think of this Conclusion section as the bow that wraps your study up.

**Some Thoughts on Contribution**

Of course, whether your study makes a significant contribution is a subjective assessment. There will be differences of opinion. However, studies that are judged to make a significant contribution (e.g., get accepted for publication in top-tier journals) generally do a good job of answering the following sorts of questions.

“How does this study *significantly* advance understanding of an important HR phenomenon?”

“How does this study add to, or change, a conversation being had about an important topic in the HR literature?”

“How does this study provide a *significant* theoretical, empirical, practical, AND/OR methodological advancement?”

If you don’t have a good answer to at least one of the above questions, then you might have to wonder about the potential contribution of your study.

Following are some examples of cases I have often seen made for contribution that are generally not successful (in italics), along with my comments on why they are generally not successful (in plain text).

a. “*Studies have shown that Variable A predicts Variable B, and other studies have shown that Variable B predicts Variable C. However, no single study has ever simultaneously tested the entire mediational chain Variable A → Variable B → Variable C. This study tests that entire mediational chain.*”

- This doesn’t tell us anything new. We already knew how these variables were related from previous studies.

b. “*No studies have ever tested whether Variable A and Variable B are related, so our study is the first to ever test for this relationship*.”

- Just because no studies have been done on a topic does not mean that the topic is worth studying. There may be a good reason no studies have been done on that topic. You need to make a case for why studying that topic is important.

c. “*Smith (2015) is a highly-cited study on Topic X. However, we point out a number of methodological problems with Smith (2015; e.g., small sample, deficient measures). Our study addresses all of these methodological problems and is therefore the most appropriate and cutting-edge study to date on Topic X. We come to the same conclusions as Smith (2015)*.”

- If your methodologically superior study comes to the same conclusion as the methodologically inferior study that already exists, this just suggests that the methodological issues you pointed out did not seem to matter. Your study hasn’t changed what we know about Topic X. Essentially, you just carried out a very well-designed conceptual replication study.

d. “*This study highlights and demonstrates an important problem facing organizations*.”

- Just describing, or pointing out, a problem is often not enough. The strongest papers also suggest and test a solution.

e. “*It is well-known that Variable A and Variable B are related. However, the present study demonstrates three moderators of that relationship. Each of the moderators slightly, but statistically significantly, changes the magnitude of the relationship between Variable A and Variable B*.”

- Moderators aren’t usually very interesting unless they fundamentally change the nature of the relationship between variables. For example, if two variables correlate .40 and your moderator only changes that relationship to .35 and .45 at low and high levels of the moderator, respectively; that doesn’t change that the relationship between those two variables is moderately strong.

f. “*It is well-known that Variable A and Variable B are related. However, the present study demonstrates a variable that strongly moderates this relationship*.”

- This sort of study can provide a contribution, but that contribution is often very narrow (i.e., only demonstrating a single moderator of an established relationship). A case would need to be made for why it is really important to know about that single moderator and why other moderators are not examined. These are often studies that get made into “research reports” even if they do make a useful, but narrow, contribution.

g. “*This study sheds light on the ‘black box’ of why Variable A and Variable B are related by demonstrating that Variable M* [which is extremely conceptually and empirically similar to Variable A or B] *mediates the relationship between Variable A and Variable B*.”

- I often see studies that introduce a “mediator” that seems to just be a slightly tweaked/reworded version of the predictor or criterion and that correlates strongly with either the predictor or criterion. Imagine a study that demonstrates affective commitment (which correlates about .70 with job satisfaction) mediates the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance. Of course you’re going to find significant mediation because the job satisfaction and affective commitment are so conceptually and empirically similar. Does this really significantly advance our understanding of the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance?

h. “*This study sheds light on the ‘black box’ of why Variable A and Variable B are related by demonstrating that Variable M mediates the relationship between Variable A and Variable B* [although, they cannot rule out reverse causation].”

- This often happens when studies use a cross-sectional design to study mediation. The relationships in their study cannot distinguish between which of the following is true: A→M→B, B→M→A, or some other causal ordering.

i. “*No studies have ever tested the relationship between Variable A and Variable B, which we have already established is a very important phenomenon. We draw on the Grand Theory of X to explain the relationship between Variable A and Variable B. Specifically, this theory suggests A and B are related because Variable A causes Mechanism 1, which leads to Mechanism 2, which causes Variable B* [but this study does not actually measure Mechanism 1 and Mechanism 2; it only measures Variable A and Variable B].”

- I often see reviewers give a hard time to studies that propose various mechanisms (e.g., mediators) that might explain the relationships between variables, but don’t actually measure those mechanisms. Reviewers ask “why didn’t you actually test the mechanisms you were proposing?”

j. “*This literature review reviews all studies on Topic X, a topic that has never been reviewed before*.”

- There are a couple of potential problems here. First, the criticism of (b) above is relevant (just because no one has reviewed this literature before does not mean it should be reviewed; you need to make a case for why reviewing that literature is important). Second, just reviewing the studies does not always significantly advance understanding of the topic. The worst literature reviews are those that just describe what all of the studies on that topic have found, almost like a laundry list (e.g., Study 1 found this, Study 2 found that, Study 3 found something else, and on and on). The best literature reviews critically review the studies and integrate them; provide some answers for conflicting (or seemingly conflicting) or similar results. They also point out “what we still do not know” in addition to “what we know from prior studies.”