WHO ARE THE MIDDLE MANAGERS: A SEMI-STRUCTURED LITERATURE REVIEW

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Abstract:

This paper represents a semi-systematic literature review on middle managers. With more than 2 600 articles published since 1956, on a topic that was conceptualized from many angles and disciplines, this approach was the most suitable research considering the volume of papers having middle managers at the core of their research.

The research question is broad: How has research on middle managers developed over time? As a result, we can observe that the interest in middle managers is growing, with the number of articles published in 2023 reaching the highest level ever: 330 papers. This is 4.4 times higher than all-time research done on this stream. The dominant theme is on the role of middle managers: what that role is, what the role should be, what is influencing it, and how it transforms under the impact of the constant systemic changes starting in the '80s. The seminal work is built around the strategic contribution of middle managers. Other themes such as processes, identity, and innovation are also present and give rich perspectives on this fragile, undervalued, and miscast resource.

As per the current state of research, while the interest is obvious, the existing knowledge lacks coherence and cumulative impact. Future research has many opportunities to add knowledge because middle managers represent the structures in hierarchical organizations and their role continues to evolve along with the organizations.

Key words: middle managers, literature review, roles, strategic middle management, systemic changes

JEL classification: M10, M12, M14, O15, J24

1. INTRODUCTION

Organizations go through times of perpetual upheaval that ask for the workforce to continuously adapt. These seismic shifts come from several places: geopolitical shifts represented by a fractured world, misinformation, climate, and sustainability (World Economic Forum, 2024), economic shifts coming from accentuated deregulation, global competition and efficiency pressure, and workforce shifts coming from technology, generational changes, remote-work trends, matrixed teams (Goldstein, 2012; Hassard and Morris, 2021). Most organizations experience some form of radical change, "a qualitative alteration of an organization's rules of organizing" (Huy, 2002).

In this context, the paper zooms in on the middle managers, an employee segment that is by design positioned in the middle of organizations, having the traditional role of translating the strategy into actionable initiatives for the teams (Wooldridge et al., 2008).

By definition, middle managers "are those who occupy positions between the strategic apex and the operating core of an organization" (Mintzberg, 1989), are "managers who operate in the middle of the organization" (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1992), represent "any manager two levels below CEO and one level above the frontline" (Huy, 2002) or are "those who manage at least one subordinate level of managers while also reporting to a higher managerial level" (Hassard and Morris, 2021). While there is some consensus on the definitions, most induce a hierarchical approach to middle management, even though the quintessence of the role, with its opportunities and struggles, comes from the role position: access to top management with a solid knowledge of operations. This allows middle managers to have a mediator position between strategy and day-to-day activity (Nonaka, 1994). Moreover, some researchers argue that their hierarchic position perpetuated the misconceptions as they are not just "thrown" into hierarchies, they are the hierarchies with all their dynamics of resistance and control (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Harding et al., 2014). Further on, the definition to be considered as the most comprehensive, without limiting to the hierarchical perspective, is that middle managers are "managers with access to top management, coupled with a very good knowledge of operations" (Wooldridge et al., 2008).

This central position comes with challenging and often contradictory demands for middle managers: to maintain business continuity as they implement change (Huy, 2002), to implement change that they are subject to (Heyden et al., 2018), to bring new learning as they build on the existing competencies (Floyd and Lane, 2000), to explore new opportunities while they exploit the existing resources (Greven et al., 2023).

With more than 2 600 articles published since 1956 and the number of annual papers on the rise, middle managers' research is very active and goes hand in hand with the organizational and systemic changes happening in the world. Considering this, as well as the angles and disciplines the topic was addressed, a semi-systematic literature review is the most suitable research method for the given moment (Snyder, 2019).

The research question is broad: How has research on middle managers developed over time? With this, the paper aims to provide an overview of the research done so far, map the dominant themes and theoretical lenses, and synthesize the existing knowledge.

2. METHODOLOGY

For the semi-systematic literature review, the research database was constructed by searching Scopus database on March 7, 2024. The search was within the article title, abstract, and keywords field, having the following selection of quotes: "middle manager" OR "middle management" OR "middle-manage*" OR "middle-level manage*". This led to 5 066 results all-time, with the first indexed article in 1956. Further on, the filter English in the area of 'Business, Management, and Accounting' led to 2 639 results. This combination of keywords and filters was used by Heyden et al. (2023), as part of a bibliometric analysis meant to show the contribution to middle management made by Steven W. Floyd. Together with Bill Wooldridge, they are considered the parents of middle management research. Having this said, building the base of research for the semi-systematic literature review on their perspective on searching for all the content related to middle managers is a credible source.
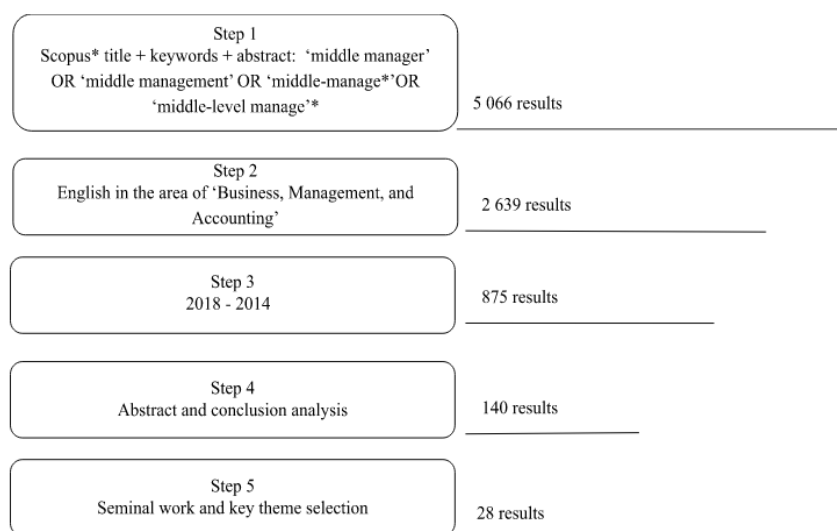

Figure no. 1. Data selection criteria
Source: own elaboration using the steps applied in searching Scopus database

Further on, to have an overview of the recent literature themes, 2018 - 2024 was selected as a time interval. This led to 875 articles. I chose 140 articles based on abstract and conclusion content analysis and deep-dived into 28 articles to identify seminal work and key themes. The exact steps can also be followed in Figure no. 1.

3. RESULTS

The interest for middle managers is significant, growing consistently over the last decade, and reaching a record number of 330 articles published in 2023.
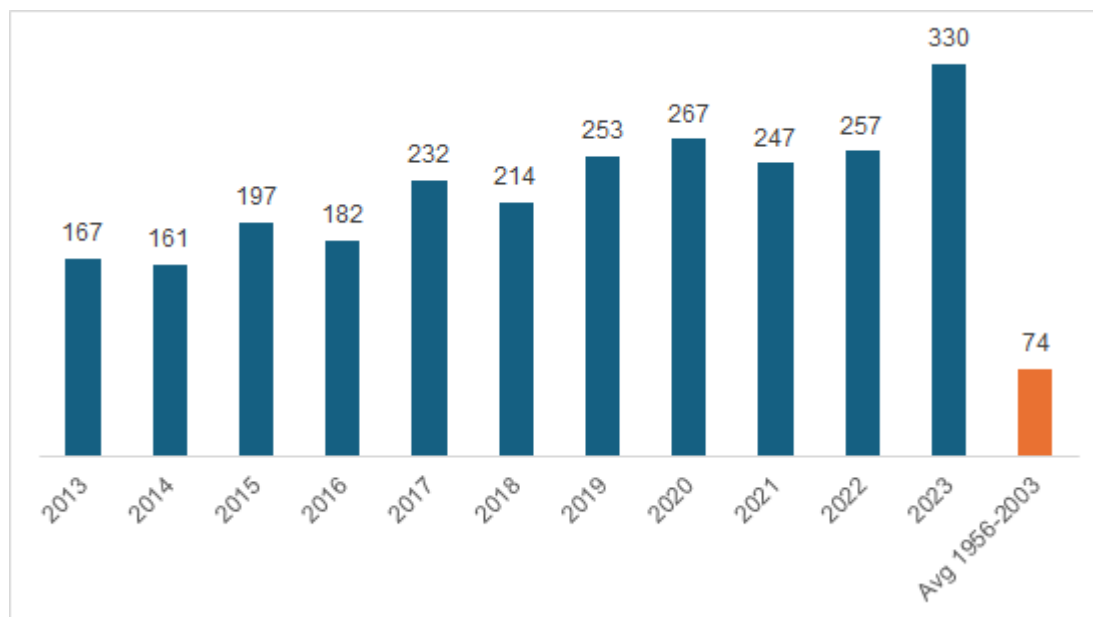

Figure no. 2. Annual number of articles published on middle management, 2013-2023
Source: own elaboration based on the annual no. of articles displayed in Scopus database by applying year of publication filter

3.1. A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF MIDDLE MANAGERS

To get a good understanding of the context in which the research on middle management evolved, it is important to see it through the lenses of systemic changes. These explain both the need and the challenges observed in the research and also why middle managers' roles and contributions are scrutinized every few years with papers such as Losing the plot? Middle managers and identity (Thomas and Linstead, 2002), Who is 'the middle manager'? (Harding et al., 2014), Heroes or Villains? Recasting Middle Management Roles, Processes, and Behaviours (Taracki et al., 2023).

There are two distinct phases in the history of middle managers, as observed in the USA market (Goldstein, 2012):

Phase one: beginning of 20th century - mid 70's. This is considered the golden age of middle managers. Their numbers grew along with industrialization, reaching a maximum in the post-war era, the '50s. The more subordinates, the bigger the pay, leading to middle managers building mini-empires (Goldstein, 2012).

Phase two: Mid-'80s - present times. In this phase, deregulation, global competition, pressure on efficiency, and fast results led to perceiving hierarchies - largely represented by middle managers - as the main source of inefficiency. This led to flattening and delayering, both of them still used to this day as a stakeholder-friendly strategy (Goldstein, 2012; Hassard and Morris, 2021).

Changing geographies, a similar phenomenon is observed by researchers in the UK, where in mid '90 middle managers experienced layoffs, delayering, and a lot of bad press especially because of the government pressure to reduce the number of "people in grey suits" from public administration (Dopson and Stewart, 1990; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Currie and Procter, 2005).

On top of these changes, events such as the technological boom in the 1990s - 2000, the 2008 financial crisis, and the 2020 pandemic also had an impact on the need to understand middle

management, especially since regardless of the changes, organizations are still predominantly organized as hierarchies (McCann et al., 2008; Hassard and Morris, 2021).

3.2. FOUNDATION OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

The foundation of looking at middle managers as an asset and a strategic actor started during the '70s. The traditional view of middle managers was that of suppliers of information and "consumers" of business decisions, as well as those who solve problems and distribute work and resources to people (Zaleznik, 1977). In other words, their main role was to implement the strategy and their only contribution to strategy formulation was to provide information (Wooldridge et al., 2008). This model considers top managers as the key actors and it relies on a very clear differentiation between strategy formulation and strategy implementation. This is called by Wooldridge et al. (2008) *The Choice perspective* on strategy and some of its main thinkers are Chandler (1962), Child (1972), Ansoff (1965), Andrews (1971), M. Porter (1980), Hambrick and Mason (1984).

This perspective is the foundation of Henry Mintzberg's work. He claims that separating strategy formulation from strategy implementation creates an erroneous separation of work in the strategy formation process, with top management having the key role to think and other actors within the organization to do (Wooldridge et al., 2008). Together with him, other authors contribute to a more comprehensive perspective of the middle manager: Bower (1970) and Kanter (1982) also highlight the role of middle management in strategy, Mintzberg and Waters (1985) introduce the "strategic learning" concept or Burgelman (1983; cited by Wooldridge et al., 2008) that suggests a redesign of the top management role towards helping middle managers with resources and builds on their ideas and initiatives. All of them contribute to *The Social learning perspective* on strategy, as it is mentioned by Wooldridge et al. (2008).

Building on it, Steven W. Floyd and Bill Wooldridge consolidate the strategic role of the middle manager and open the conversation from *the middle manager's perspective*. Their papers from 1990 and 1992 represent the seminal work on middle managers, their central role in the organization, and strategic processes (Heyden et al., 2023). They kickstarted an area of research that explores the middle management perspective in strategy-making processes, having as a redline the relationship between middle managers' strategic involvement and organizational performance (Wooldridge et al., 2008). A large part of the literature on middle managers builds on their work, with most of the research being done on explaining middle managers' areas of influence and the relationship between their involvement and different organizational outcomes, including organizational cognition and change management.

3.3. THEORETICAL LENSES IN MIDDLE MANAGEMENT RESEARCH

The theoretical lenses applied in middle management research reflect how organizations evolved and, along with them, the need to get a more complex understanding of these employees. As per the papers included in this research, there are three levels of theoretical concepts used. Tier 1 refers to core papers of middle management research. Tier 2 includes papers from interconnected areas that broaden the scope of middle management research. Tier 3 includes papers researching middle managers from a broader perspective, connecting it with events outside organizations. Some papers use more than one theoretical concept and will appear in more tiers.

Tier 2 includes other theories, fragmented across research: organizational culture and learning theories (Nonaka, 1994), strategy theory and strategy renewal (Floyd and Lane, 2000), social psychology of emotions (Huy, 2002), social constructionist framework (Thomas and Linstead, 2002), sociological theory (McCann et al., 2008), identity constitution theory and organizational identity (Harding et al., 2014), relational theory (Floyd and Lane, 2000), social identity (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020), behavioral theory (Taracki et al., 2023), boundary spanning

theory (Porck and Van Knippenberg, 2023), conservation of resources theory (Gerpott and Quaquebeke, 2023).

Table no. 1. Theoretical concepts used in middle management research

Level	Theoretical concepts	Key Authors
Tier 1	role theory	(Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990, 1992; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Currie and Procter, 2005; Mantere, 2008; Rensburg et al., 2014; Van Doorn et al., 2023);
	organizational theory	Nonaka, 1994; McCann et al., 2008; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Harding et al., 2014; Taracki et al., 2023; Porck and Van Knippenberg, 2023;
Tier 2	change management and organizational change	Floyd and Lane, 2000; Huy, 2002; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Hassard and Morris, 2021;
	control and resistance theories	Harding et al., 2014; Heyden et al. 2018; Buick et al., 2017, Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020;
Tier 3	labor process theory and sociological theory	McCann et al., 2008;
	lean and mean theory	Goldstein, 2012;

Source: own elaboration based on the literature review

4. DOMINANT THEMES AND FINDINGS

The role represents the central theme of middle management research.

Below we have an overview of the dominant themes with the caveat that, while the papers are clustered around one theme, they are interconnected.

For example, a key element of middle managers' identity is their positioning in the middle of the organization (Huy, 2002; Gjerde & Alvesson, 2020). A trend like open strategy, in which other actors are involved in the process, threatens their subject position as strategists (Splitter et al., 2023). While identity literature has a solid contribution on its own, it is highly connected to role literature.

Overall though, most of the literature leads or is built on the role middle managers have or should have.

Table no. 2. Dominant themes of middle management research

Theme	Core ideas	Key Authors
Role	Covers role enactment, role ambiguity, role conflict, role enablers, role agency, and boundary spanning. The main goal of the work is to identify the roles	Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990; Currie and Procter, 2005; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Mantere, 2008; McCann et al., 2008;

Theme	Core ideas	Key Authors
	middle managers have or should have, as well as their struggles to stay relevant considering the systemic changes they are subject to.	Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Splitter et al., 2023; Van Doorn et al., 2023; Pork, 2023;
Processes	Includes upward and downward influencing, issue-selling, emotional balancing, sensemaking and sense-giving, discursive competencies, ambidexterity, and change management. This stream deep dives into the cognitive mechanisms middle managers use in their work and looks at the specific ways middle managers contribute to strategy.	Wooldridge and Floyd, 1990; Floyd and Lane, 2000; Huy, 2002; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Buick et al., 2017; Heyden et al., 2018; Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Splitter et al., 2023; Greven et al., 2023;
Identity	This stream covers how middle managers build their identity, considering the need to prove their legitimacy constantly.	Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Harding et al., 2014; Heyden, 2018; Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020; Splitter et al., 2023;
Innovation and organization al learning	Positions middle managers as "knowledge engineers" with key contributions in knowledge creation and integration to new products.	Nonaka, 1994; Mantere, 2008; Heyden et al., 2018;

Source: own elaboration based on the literature review

4.1. DEEP DIVE INTO THE ROLE LITERATURE ON MIDDLE MANAGERS

The role represents "expected behaviors of actors in a social system and specific interactions, associations, and interdependencies between them" (Georgakakis et al.., 2022, cited by Taracki et al., 2023). The concept of role is used to explain individual behaviors and relies on the idea that the subject of the role is influenced by external constraints (Mantere, 2008). In the literature, the role of the middle manager is mostly associated with upward and downward expectations (Floyd and Lane, 2000), as middle managers have the responsibility to implement top management plans, ensuring frontline positions do their roles also (Harding et al., 2014).

Based on the papers analyzed, there are two building blocks of the role literature.

The functionalist approach. By synthesizing the literature between 1970 - 1990, Steven W. Floyd and Bill Wooldridge (1992) propose four strategic roles of middle managers. Their framework is widely used and accepted in the community of researchers (Mantere, 2008). Moreover, middle managers identify themselves easily with the framework also, as observed in studies run by Mantere (2008) and Rensburg et al. (2014).
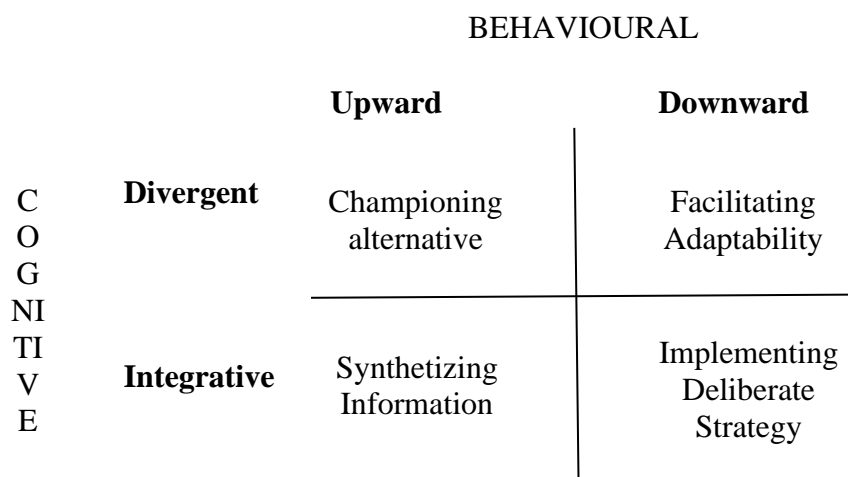
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		Upward	Downward
C O G	**Divergent**	Championing alternative	Facilitating Adaptability
NI TI V E	**Integrative**	Synthetizing Information	Implementing Deliberate Strategy

Figure no. 3. Middle managers' strategic roles
Source: Wooldridge and Floyd (1992)

Each of the four roles is different through the combination of components of the axes. The most widespread is implementation, still considered important to this day because it is the role that ensures consistency between people's activity and strategy (Currie and Procter, 2005; Mantere, 2008). Through the synthesizer role, middle managers interpret the information and insights from the market, teams, and operational performance and redirect it to top management to be further integrated into strategy. From the champion role, middle managers' influence is oriented upwards, this time through a divergent, entrepreneurial mindset that aims to change the top management approach to the future strategy. As facilitators, middle managers encourage new ideas, experimentation, and change within their teams (Wooldridge and Floyd, 1992; Currier and Procter, 2005).

The strategy-in-practice approach. While Steven W. Floyd and Bill Wooldridge wanted to create a very clear framework of the roles of middle managers, this approach is considered by some research streams as too rigid for the theory of management and the challenges of contemporary organizations. Researchers such as Mantere (2008) believe that the strategy-in-practice perspective should be added, like the role of middle managers in radical changes (Huy, 2002). Starting in early 2000 new roles were proposed by researchers.

Change agent. This role appears in Nonaka (1994) and develops especially under the resistance literature umbrella (Buick et al., 2017; Van Doorn et al., 2023). As part of the groundbreaking work on middle managers' role as change agents is the research done by Quy Huy (2002) on radical change and the role middle managers have through their emotional balancing capabilities. This is particularly important considering the level of organizational changes nowadays and the growing importance of well-being.

Sensemaker. "Sensemaking is a social process of meaning construction and deconstruction through which managers understand, interpret and create a sense of themselves and others of their changing organizational context and surroundings" (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Thomas and Linstead, 2002; Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020). A sub-activity of sensemaking is also sense-giving which is "a discursive ability to tell a story in the right way, in the right time, in the right place (Rouleau and Balogun, 2011).

Umbrella carrier. This is a highly pragmatic role, articulated by middle managers themselves. The main perceived role of the middle manager is to protect their teams from excessive pressures and demands coming from top management (Gjerde and Alvesson, 2020).
Connecting leader. This role is built on the duality of middle managers' roles and takes several forms: broker (negotiates with both top management and junior staff), Janus (empathizes and understands both perspectives), tight-rope walker (critically evaluates both perspectives) conduit

(represents all voices). This is more of an aspirational model and it comes with burnout and excessive exposure risks (Jaser, 2021).

4.2. MIDDLE MANAGER PERSONA

Middle managers are portrayed as well-intentioned, but in a fragile position.

In 82% of articles they are presented in a positive light. Researchers focus on their contribution and explain their behaviors and the context of their role enactment. They are described as "change agents for the self-revolution of the organization" and "knowledge engineers" (Nonaka, 1994), key levers of organizational renewal and crucial to introducing new structures and processes (Huy, 2002; Heyden et al., 2018), central to organizational outcomes, recognized as a resource, with a pivotal role in liaising between senior and junior staff and critical in modern team-based organizations for intergroup effectiveness (Wooldridge et al., 2008; Harding et al., 2014, Porck and Van Knippenberg, 2023). Negative traits include sabotage, delays, bias, opportunism, and other ethical concerns (Wooldridge et al., 2008).

In 67% of the papers analyzed, middle managers are presented in a bad state, with a fragile position. The main source of their precarious subject position is the need to prove their legitimacy, especially as strategists because they lack the formal authority to act as such. They also experience a huge pressure on their time and well-being, while they continue to be seen as an unnecessary cost, the main target of organizational delayering and flattening (Mantere, 2008; Rouleau and Balogun, 2011; Hassard and Morris, 2021, Splitter et al., 2023). In a few highlights extracted from the papers, even some of them describe themselves as "lucky impostor" or experiencing "impossible demands on the role" and they are indeed positioned to constantly need to justify their role (Thomas and Linstead, 2002), experiencing inconsistent, contradictory expectations, and pressure from both senior and junior levels (Currier and Procter, 2005, Harding et al., 2014; Gjerde and Alvenson, 2020, Floyd and Lane, 2000), ill-prepared and underinformed, poorly equipped to guide their teams in times of change (Buick et al., 2017). However, middle managers are also portrayed as focused, committed, and enthusiastic, despite the role stretches and professional challenges that they experience (McCann et al., 2008). Some middle managers consider that in flatter organizations they get to enjoy new freedoms, are closer to top management, can experiment more, and learn new things all the time given the new responsibilities. Some even mention they feel more in control of their destiny (Dopson and Stewart, 1990).

Lastly, within the strategy-in-practice stream, middle managers are analyzed more in terms of relationality, rather than a standalone group of employees. This creates a better understanding of the reality middle managers live in. Some of the key research papers come from Quy Huy (2002) and his work on the role of emotional balancing of teams, Rouleau and Balogun (2011) which show how discursive competencies are used by middle managers to play their strategic role, and Porck and Van Knippenberg (2023) that show how critical the role of middle managers is in modern team-based organizations for intergroup effectiveness through boundary spanning theory.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As organizations become more complex and impacted by different forms of change, middle managers might have a pivotal role in the future of work. We saw that the interest for them is significant and the literature avenues evolve together with the need to understand this often unsung resource.

The main contribution of this paper is that it creates a snapshot of the knowledge state of middle managers by identifying the main themes and theoretical concepts used in research so far. Moreover, it bridges the middle management literature with the systemic changes that have impacted organizations since the '80s. This gives a comprehensive view on the need to make sense of middle managers' role and contribution to organizational performance and shows the potential of

future research given topics of high interest such as the future of work, digital transformation and AI, and economic shifts that will impact middle managers also.

Role theory and organizational theory are at the core of middle management research. This is reflected in the dominant themes of the literature. Role is again the most frequent theme, approached from different angles: from role enactment, role ambiguity, role conflict, and role enablers, to role agency and boundary spanning. However, we could also observe how the literature became more complex, deep-diving into processes that reflect middle managers' cognitive mechanisms and looking into the specific ways in which they contribute to strategy. Identity is a key stream that reflects the struggle to stay relevant.

Another aspect is that middle managers are mostly portrayed in a positive light, however highly fragile, in a continuous need to prove their legitimacy and strategist role.

While the literature proved some contributions of middle managers to shared strategic understanding and commitment, strategic change and strategic renewal, organizational learning, capability building, and better decision-making, the relationship leading to economic performance is not yet proven (Taracki et al., 2023).

Middle management research is abundant, but fragmented, missing a cumulative impact and not updated to contemporary organizations. Immediate attention is required for researches that prove the impact on the organizational outcome, that provide an update on understanding their contribution and role, especially in the digital world and behavioral theories specific to middle managers in modern organizations (Taracki et al., 2023; Van Doorn et al., 2023; Heyden et al., 2018).

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