

Editorial

Which reporting guideline should I use and why?

This special issue has highlighted the many different approaches and methods for doing a literature review. These have included the established methods for undertaking a systematic review with meta-analysis as developed by the Cochrane Collaboration (Higgins and Green 2019) to more recent innovations involving the synthesis of both qualitative and quantitative data, alongside scoping reviews which map out the scope of existing research, telling us what is known about a particular topic. We argue that no review method is better than another; what is important is that the method used is appropriate to the focus of the review and is comprehensively undertaken. For example, a scoping review is used when we want to scope or map out the existing literature and to identify research gaps. It does not undertake an in-depth synthesis of the literature and is therefore unlikely to be the method of choice for those reviewing the literature to justify an empirical project. Where a deeper level of synthesis is required and where the nuances of the research really matter in order to justify a potential research question, a method of reviewing the literature which requires synthesis and analysis is required.

Over recent years we have seen the development of many methods for doing a literature review. This rise in methods has generated discussion about the use of different approaches and challenged the assumption that a Cochrane systematic review is appropriate in all cases. As with all research, the appropriate method depends on the research question. However, it can be argued that the proliferation of methods is confusing for both scholars and readers alike (Booth et al 2012, Aveyard and Bradbury-Jones 2019) and whether so many different types are required and, in fact are really so different from each other, is a topic of debate.

Authors setting out to write a literature review need to be able to navigate the wide choice of methods available. In a previous publication, we have called for clarity and consolidation of methods used in papers that report a literature review (Aveyard and Bradbury-Jones (2019) and while there is no quick fix for this, we have recommended that authors identify a published method that is clearly described. An example is Thomas and Harden's thematic synthesis (2008). This is a concise and accessible publication which outlines the method for doing a thematic synthesis. If authors adhere to a published method for doing a literature review this will help to ensure that we build on and consolidate existing methods rather than develop further approaches. For example, it is not uncommon for authors to create a new name for their review, and whilst this is imaginative, it is perhaps not helpful in achieving consistency in the scholarly development of the field. The caveat here is that, as with all research methods, new developments in the ways of doing a review will arise and we need to be responsive to this. However, these should be the exception and the need for such developments should be clearly documented.

Once authors have identified the method for doing a literature review that is the right approach for their task, the use of a reporting guideline can help guide and support the writing process. Those familiar with academic reporting more generally will be aware of the EQUATOR -network website, on which there is reference to many different reporting

guidelines which are increasingly a stipulated requirement by journals for papers submitted for publication. For those doing a literature review, these include the PRISMA-P statement (Page 2021) for systematic reviews with meta-analysis, the ENTREQ guidelines (Tong et al 2012) for reviews of qualitative research, and the eMERGe guidelines for the reviews undertaken using a meta-ethnographic approach (France et al 2019). There are PRISMA-ScR guidelines for doing a scoping review. Of course, given the different methods for doing a review, there is not a corresponding guideline for each one. Until the emergence of ENTREQ and eMERGe, the PRISMA guidelines were often regarded as the default reporting guideline for all reviews and it is not impossible that this assumption persists; yet using an inappropriate reporting guideline risks shoe-horning a method into a guideline to which it simply doesn't fit. Therefore, it is the task of the authors to identify an appropriate reporting guideline and to include this with their review on submission of their paper for publication. This means that reporting guidelines may need to be considered to be broad brush rather than specific to certain types of reviews; for example, in the revised PRISMA guidelines, Page et al (2021) argue that these guidelines can be applied not only to systematic reviews with meta-analysis but to reviews where no meta-analysis is possible and also to mixed methods reviews.

We argue that this is appropriate given there are many common features of a review that exist across the different methods. There are more similarities than differences in the literature review process, as all reviews place emphasis on the need for a focused research question and a planned search strategy. Thereafter, in-depth reviews recommend a process of data extraction, critical appraisal and synthesis to ensure that new findings come from the review; the key element here is that these findings should reflect a new interpretation of the papers whether this is achieved through some form of synthesis depending on the type of data included in the review's studies. Scoping reviews require less depth in the analysis and interpretation of the papers as it is the overall mapping of the research that is important in these reviews. In some instances there will be an exact fit between the reporting guideline and the publication itself. For example, a systematic review with meta-analysis has a corresponding guideline in the PRISMA checklist (Page et al 2021) and meta-ethnography has a corresponding guideline in the eMERGe guidelines (France et al 2019). However overall, the principle is that reporting guidelines need to be relevant to the overall type of review rather than the exact review type and methods for doing a literature review should not be shoehorned into a guideline that is inappropriate for them. If a journal requests a specific guideline, for example PRISMA, as a default requirement, discussion with the journal editor would be a useful first step in clarifying the exact expectations.

At the Journal of Clinical Nursing, we are committed to the publication of well conducted literature reviews and we are delighted to showcase so many within this special issue. Moving forward, we promote the judicious use of reporting guidelines which can be justified and which are relevant to the identified method undertaken in the review. We encourage further discussion of the appropriate use of guidelines, especially where this is unclear or where the Prisma guidelines appear to be the default even where alternative guidelines might be usefully referred to instead.

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