

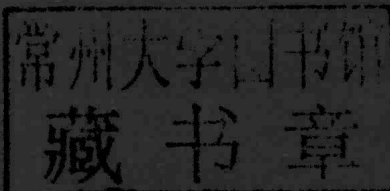
Literature Reviews in Social Work

Robin Kiteley and
Chris Stogdon



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3 Church Street
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Editor: Kate Wharton
Assistant editor: Emma Milman
Production editor: Katie Forsythe
Proofreader: Sharon Cawood
Indexer: Elizabeth Ball
Marketing manager: Tamara Navaratnam
Cover design: Shaun Mercier
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in Great Britain by Henry Ling Limited,
at the Dorset Press, Dorchester, DT1 1HD



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First published 2014

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2013937716

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-14462-0126-8

ISBN 978-1-4462-0127-5 (pbk)

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Acknowledgements

Robin: Big snaps for Christian McGrath for being such a wonderfully generous and supportive friend, for keeping me going and for providing a much needed sanctuary. A massive thank you to my parents, Glen and Phil Kiteley, for basically supporting me every step of the way in life! It means the world to me. A huge thanks and bear hug for Ben Raikes, whose friendship, understanding and marvellous way with metaphors have brightened up many a day. Thanks to Gregory and Harrison for laughs, giggles and wicked dance moves. Finally, a heartfelt thanks to the colleagues who have supported me in this project, especially Kate McGuinn, and to the students I work with who have contributed to my thinking in so many ways.

Chris: I would like to thank all the people who have supported me in writing this work, including family, friends and colleagues from The University of Huddersfield, and special thanks to Guy, David and Anna for their love and patience.

Robin and Chris: We would both like to say a massive thank you to Emma Milman at Sage for her unflagging positivity, advice, feedback and patience. Thanks also to Alice Oven, Kate Wharton and Laura Walmsley for their support and advice along the way. A big thank you to Katie Forsythe for getting us through the production process. Finally, we'd like to thank our anonymous peer-reviewers, who provided some very helpful ideas and suggestions for the development of the manuscript.

Publisher's Acknowledgements

The Publisher would like to thank JISCMail and the Social Work-Alcohol-Drugs list administrator/owner for permission to use the screenshots in Chapter 4. They would also like to thank the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), ProQuest and Emerald for kindly granting permission to publish their material.

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Literature Reviews in Social Work

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Robin: For my smart and smiley nephews, Owen and Ryan
Chris: For Kathleen and Ged – a mother and a brother loved like no other

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Introduction

☒ Learning Outcomes ☒

- To appreciate the relevancy of literature review processes for social work students and practitioners
- To gain an overview of the main features included throughout this book

Why Bother about Literature Reviews?

This book has been written to help social work students and professionals produce focused, well-researched and appropriately written literature reviews. There are several contexts in which you may be required to produce a literature review, including:

- Social work undergraduate or postgraduate programmes may require students to produce a project or dissertation, which is based around (or incorporates) a literature review.
- Research into social work practice is becoming increasingly 'evidence-based', which requires that practitioners and researchers are familiar with the findings that have been published in the literature around social work theory and practice.

The following chapters focus on (i) the practical steps involved in preparing and producing a literature review and (ii) the wider context in which literature reviews are used in social work learning and practice.

Features of this Book

We have incorporated various features into this book which are designed to:

- help you find relevant information
- provide you with opportunities to develop your skills
- prompt you to consider issues in more detail
- help you consolidate your learning and understanding
- extend your understanding through suggestions for follow-up activities.

Below is a brief summary of specific features.

Learning Outcomes

Each chapter begins with a bullet-pointed list of specific learning outcomes. Use these to get a quick overview of the key things you will be learning about.

Chapter Summaries

At the end of each chapter we have provided bullet-point summaries of the key points that have been addressed. This is intended to help with your recall of the main things that you have been reading about and, along with the 'Learning Outcomes' mentioned above, help you to navigate to relevant sections of the book.

Activities

While guidance and recommendations can help to put you on the right track, there is no substitute for trying things out for yourself. This is why each chapter contains a number of activities which are designed to get you actively involved in the processes that we describe.

It's useful to complete as many of these activities as possible, as they will help you to focus on your own learning, assess your own progress and also learn from any things that you get 'wrong'. Remember that some of the most valuable learning that we do can come from the things we struggle with or feel that we are getting wrong.

Many of the activities that we have devised feature extracts from real journal articles and other research sources. This is aimed to help you to become comfortable and familiar with the kind of material that you will need to read for your own literature review work.

Now take a few minutes to complete the introductory activity below.

ACTIVITY

Starting points...

This exercise is designed to help you to reflect on your current understanding of literature reviews, and what might be involved in the process of carrying out a literature review. Try to answer each question as fully as possible:

1. What does the phrase 'literature review' mean to you? You could answer this by thinking how you would define it, and also how you think you might go about doing it.
 2. What is the value of a literature review in social work study or practice? What could social workers and students gain from undertaking a literature review?
 3. List the different stages that you think are involved in carrying out a literature review.
 4. What do you imagine will be the biggest challenge (for you personally) in carrying out your own literature review?
-

Did you know?

The 'Did you know?' boxes are designed to flag up quick snippets of information, such as definitions of key terms, explanations of key ideas or quick overviews of the context relating to particular issues. The following example illustrates this:

? Did you know? Referencing different types of information ?

A key requirement for effective literature reviews is that all sources used must be clearly and accurately cited and referenced. The format of a reference will vary depending on the type of publication that you are referencing. For instance, you may be familiar with the format of book, journal article and web page references, but did you know there is also a particular format for referencing:

- Electronic books
- Government/official documents
- Acts of Parliament
- ...and many other types of publication!

Chapter 9 looks at how to cite and reference your sources correctly, and also gives examples of the different types of reference that you are likely to need.

Think about...

The 'Think about...' boxes included in each chapter are designed to encourage you to stop and consider significant issues in relation to the literature review process, or in relation to your own learning process.

Think about... What counts as 'good' research?

A significant part of carrying out an effective literature review is not only being able to find relevant research literature on your chosen topic, but being able to provide a critical commentary on the quality of that research.

- What criteria (or 'yardsticks') would you put forward to help to assess the quality of the research literature that you will be reading?

We will look at assessing the quality of information sources in Chapter 4, and suggest ways of developing your critical and analytical skills in Chapter 6.

Case Studies

In some chapters case studies have been included to provide clear examples of how ideas, processes, methods or models have been used in practice. Focusing on particular cases can help us to grasp how general principles or abstract concepts can translate to the often messy and complex arena of 'real' life. This in turn can help us to develop more sophisticated and nuanced understandings of the academic resources that we use, along with their relative strengths and limitations.

Further Reading and Useful Resources

At the end of each chapter you will find some suggestions for further reading and resources which relate to the topic of that chapter. All of these suggested texts or resources are easily accessible, and some may be available through your institutional or local library service. Additionally, some chapters contain 'ideas for taking things further', which are follow-up activities that help to extend your knowledge and understanding of the topics addressed.

Getting Started

If you are entirely new to the process of carrying out a literature review, we would suggest that it would be helpful to work through this book in chapter order. The reason for this is that we have structured the book to reflect the order in which particular skills are used during the literature review process. Begin with Chapter 1, which will explain what a literature review is, and what a typical one might look like in terms of structure and contents.

If you are familiar with the literature review process, you may prefer to simply dive into the most relevant chapters for you, or the stage of the process that you are currently working on.

Chapter Summary

- We have briefly outlined why a book on literature reviews is relevant to social work students and practitioners.
- We have provided a quick overview of the main features of this book and have illustrated these with some examples.
- We have made some suggestions about where to begin with this book.

1

What is a Literature Review?

☒ Learning Outcomes ☒

- To understand what we mean by 'the literature' and evidence in social work
- To gain an awareness of what grey literature is, and why it is important
- To develop an awareness of the differing functions of literature reviews
- To gain an overview of narrative and systematic literature reviews
- To learn about the different methodologies employed in the literature review process

'The Literature' and Social Work Practice

What do we mean by 'the literature'?

'The literature' is the body of academic research that has been published and disseminated through publications such as books, academic journals, practitioner journals, websites and other sources. It's basically a shorthand way of referring to the sum of published knowledge about a particular subject. However, as you'll discover in more detail in Chapter 4, the idea of there being a coherent body of literature around a particular subject such as social work is becoming more problematic, as more and more publications appear in a variety of formats and contexts.

The nature of knowledge and evidence in social care practice

When discussing 'knowledge' in relation to social work, it can be easy to overlook some of the trickier questions about how we establish, define and verify what comes

to be understood as knowledge. We might ask whether it is even possible to achieve consensus about what constitutes useful knowledge (particularly in respect of the way social workers carry out their practice). In the current socio-political context, social workers are increasingly under pressure to be able to justify their decisions and account for their actions, yet at the same time it would appear that ideas about what constitutes effective social work practice are frequently contested, and often not well-documented in terms of available research evidence.

Pawson et al. (2003) carried out a substantial investigation into the issue of types of knowledge in social care. They propose that the questions that should be asked of any piece of knowledge can be encapsulated in the useful acronym 'TAPUPAS':

Transparency	Is it open to scrutiny?
Accuracy	Is it well grounded?
Purposivity	Is it fit for purpose?
Utility	Is it fit for use?
Propriety	Is it legal and ethical?
Accessibility	Is it intelligible?
Specificity	Does it meet source-specific standards?

ACTIVITY

Types and quality of knowledge in social care

For a flavour of some of the complex issues involved in considering the status and role of knowledge in social care practice, read the short 'Summary' section of Pawson et al.'s (2003) report, 'Types and quality of knowledge in social care', which is available at the following website address: www.scie.org.uk/publications/knowledgereviews/kr03.pdf

The use(s) of evidence

Increasingly, there is a demand for research in social work to establish evidence-based findings which can lead to replicable results in different settings. This ethos of evidence-based research comes from the domain of medicine and health care, and has gradually become more widespread in disciplines such as social care and education. Although there is recognition of the need for greater understanding of what is both effective and ineffective in social work practice, there is some disagreement as to whether evidence-based research can fulfil this role.

It should therefore be acknowledged that there are particular debates within the social work profession about the usefulness and appropriateness of evidence-based practice, with some claiming that it represents the best way of establishing better knowledge for practice, and others suggesting that it can minimise and overlook the importance of practitioners' localised knowledge. This has led some commentators to point to 'evidence-informed' approaches (Hodson and Cooke, 2004: 12), which acknowledge the importance of empirical data, but which also recognise the importance of other sources of knowledge, such as practitioner knowledge, user and carer knowledge, organisational knowledge, research knowledge and policy community

knowledge (Pawson et al., 2003). We will return to these, and other important issues relating to evidence-based practice, in more detail in Chapter 10.

Using the grey matter!

? Did you know? What is grey literature? ?

'Grey literature' has recently been defined as the various types of document produced by governments, academic institutions, businesses and industries

that are protected by intellectual property rights, of sufficient quality to be collected and preserved by library holdings or institutional repositories, but not controlled by commercial publishers i.e., where publishing is not the primary activity of the producing body. (Schöpfel, 2010)

Basically, the term describes documents that may not have been published through conventional routes, and which may therefore be trickier to find and access. They can be thought to occupy a 'grey area' in comparison to traditional published material.

Examples of grey literature

Grey literature includes publications such as:

- newsletters
- policy documents
- some research reports
- minutes of meetings
- professional and regulatory body requirements
- leaflets
- internally printed reports
- unpublished undergraduate and postgraduate theses and dissertations
- unpublished conference papers
- blogs, tweets, bulletin board and other social media postings.

Why is grey literature useful or important?

Hartman (2006: 2) explains:

Grey literature is particularly important in policy areas, where there are many issuing agencies such as think tanks, university-based research institutes, professional and trade organizations, advocacy groups, etc., all attempting to inform and influence the policy-making process.