Literature Reviews in Social Work

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What is a Literature Review?

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☑ **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

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'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?

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 lead 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.

Grey literature can promote a greater level of democracy and plurality in terms of the range of voices and opinions that are heard. However, it can also introduce some questions around issues of 'quality control', and it's important to be aware of both its strengths and limitations.

Grey literature – pros and cons

Table 1.1   Pros and cons of using grey literature

Pros	Cons
May cover issues which are very current and which have not yet been covered in the academic literature	Often not peer-reviewed and/or may not be checked by an editor – inaccuracies, inconsistency and errors may creep in
As it does not go through standard publishing processes, it can be made available very quickly and at a low cost	Reliability and validity are not guaranteed
Can provide important context to an issue or topic, particularly in relation to issues at the cutting-edge of social work practice	Often not indexed or catalogued – this can make finding it difficult
Can be more effective in terms of outlining local practice contexts which may have not come through as clearly in other literature	Some are in hard-copy format only – grey literature may have been printed in low print runs and may be difficult to access
	Online links to grey literature may only exist for a short time

?   Did you know? 'Reliability' and 'validity'   ?

These words are often used in the context of assessing the strengths and weaknesses of research processes, and you are likely to come across some discussion of them (and related issues) when reading about research methodology.
   In very broad terms:

- Reliability refers to the extent to which methods or findings are likely to yield similar results if the study, research, experiment or investigation were to be repeated in similar circumstances, using similar methods of investigation.
- Validity refers to the extent to which the research methods and instruments measure what they claim or set out to measure. An assessment of validity would also involve consideration of whether the results of a research process have been skewed or contaminated by additional (and sometimes unforeseen or unanticipated) factors in the research field and/or process.

Going grey

Time suggested: 20–30 minutes

Access the 'Review of grey literature on drug prevention among young people – Review Summary' at www.nice.org.uk/niceMedia/pdf/grey_lit_summary_v3FINAL.pdf (If the web link above is no longer active, use a search engine to find a current link to this document.)

Read the document (it is only five pages long so is quite quick to get through), and then answer the following questions:

1. What did this piece of work aim to do?
2. Why did they focus on grey literature?
3. How did they go about finding the grey literature?
4. Why was it important that the researchers applied critical appraisal criteria to the grey literature that they considered?
5. The 'Concluding remarks' section identifies several limitations of the grey literature that was reviewed. Can you identify three of these?

Introducing Literature Reviews

What is a literature review?

A literature review is a comprehensive summary of the ideas, issues, approaches and research findings that have been published on a particular subject area or topic. However, it is not a simple description of all that the reviewer has read on the topic. It is better understood as a critical synthesis (or bringing together) of:

- what can reasonably be asserted based on the extent of the literature findings
- what worked and didn't work in terms of methods of (and approaches to) investigation
- what can be gleaned from the range of theoretical perspectives that have been applied
- what gaps, inconsistencies or problems still need to be addressed in further research on the topic
- what results may reasonably be expected to be repeatable, and under what circumstances.

A good literature review will aim to 'weigh up the contribution that particular ideas, positions or approaches have made to the topic' (Hart, 1998: 9). Hart's quote emphasises the important critical and evaluative function of literature reviews. When you are preparing your own literature reviews, you will need to think about critically evaluating the research that you read. Of course, being 'critical' doesn't have to mean being 'negative' – you can also 'critically' examine the strengths and positive aspects of a piece of research.

What is the function and purpose of a literature review?

As a student or practitioner of social work you are most likely to encounter literature reviews in two main contexts:

1. Literature reviews as preparation for empirical research

A literature review is normally carried out prior to the design and implementation of the primary research methods in the case of empirical research studies. They may also be required for proposals for funding applications for research projects. In this context, the primary purposes of the literature review are:

- **To establish what has already been investigated** – therefore, researchers are far less likely to 're-invent the wheel' by simply repeating things which have already been done before.
- **To establish what methods and methodologies have already been used in the topic area** – this guides the researcher(s) in considering the most appropriate methods for their research investigation and highlights the affordances and limitations of particular methodological perspectives.
- **To establish what worked in terms of the research process** – the literature should flag up both the strengths and limitations of previous research tools/approaches and alert the researcher to potential challenges that may be associated with such resources.
- **To identify and build on the gaps in knowledge** – conducting a literature review should provide a degree of confirmation that what the researcher is planning to do is original, innovative and/or useful in some way.

2. Literature reviews as stand-alone pieces of work

Literature reviews can be carried out as a research methodology in their own right. In this case, the point of the literature review is not to prepare the way for empirical research, but instead to bring together what is known about a particular topic or issue in a way that hasn't previously been reported. The function of the literature review may therefore be to:

- consolidate understanding
- bring together findings from multiple sources
- map out the terrain of evidence in relation to a given issue
- highlight what is most convincing in the literature that has been published to date.

This in turn can serve a number of purposes, including:

- policy and practice development based on research evidence
- future research planning and development
- comparative understandings.

Is 'literature reviewing' a form of research?

There is some debate as to whether conducting a literature review, which is essentially concerned with secondary literature, can be considered to be a research process in its own right. Some commentators tend to view research as requiring the use of primary research methods, such as interviewing participants, devising and running questionnaires, carrying out observations of practice, and so on. If you are currently enrolled on an academic course at a university, you may find that a clear distinction is made between 'conducting research' and 'carrying out a literature review'. However, in reality the distinction is less clear-cut, particularly in respect of those literature reviews that have been conducted in a systematic and rigorous manner (Aveyard, 2010).

Types of Literature Review

The two main types of literature review you are likely to come across are:

- narrative literature reviews
- systematic literature reviews.

Narrative literature reviews

These are sometimes referred to as traditional literature reviews and are likely to be the most common type of literature review that you come across. They are characterised by a concern for drawing together conceptual and theoretical ideas from a range of literature. However, they can vary widely in terms of how explicit the reviewer is about how they:

- carried out the review process
- carried out their search strategy
- decided on what to include and exclude from their review
- decided on what to foreground in their synthesis of material.

In this sense, they are often viewed as being less rigorous than systematic reviews, but for students and novice literature review writers they are likely to represent the first stage of your literature review journey. They can also offer a greater degree of flexibility and the facility to adapt and change as the literature review progresses.

Systematic literature reviews

Systematic literature reviews are generally much more rigorous and systematic in terms of:

- how the review process is carried out
- how material is assessed or appraised
- how findings are reported.

They have effectively come to be seen as the 'gold standard' in respect of literature reviews.

The focus of systematic reviews is usually very well defined and relates to practice-based contexts and issues. They aim to address as much of the published literature as possible in order to develop a comprehensive coverage of the topic under investigation.

Systematic reviews require a high level of transparency relating to issues such as:

- how the research question was identified
- how the topic area was defined
- what data sources (e.g. particular databases) were used for searching
- the search terms and keywords used, and whether the search strategy was adapted or modified
- the extent of the literature identified through the search process
- the selection criteria used to decide which literature to include and exclude from the final study
- the method of the data extraction process (e.g. how data was taken from individual studies)
- the problems and challenges involved in synthesising findings/results from a number of different studies
- how consistency was maintained (this is particularly important in cases where reviews are carried out by teams).

As you can gather, the comprehensive and rigorous nature of systematic literature reviews means that they require a lot of skilful work and, in practice, are often carried out by small, dedicated teams of reviewers.

?   Did you know? Systematic review protocols   ?

Protocols are frameworks, used in the systematic review process, that are developed in advance of reviewers going off and finding the literature. Their purpose is:

- to ensure that the decision making that takes place is transparent – in this sense, they can function as a kind of audit trail
- to ensure both accuracy and consistency of approach in how the review is carried out

Review protocols are scrutinised by a panel of stakeholders, who are familiar with the topic under investigation. The panel would normally include service-users and carers (Macdonald, 2003: 5).

Have a look at the comparison table (Table 1.2), which summarises the key features and differences between narrative and systematic literature reviews.

Table 1.2   The key differences and features of narrative and systematic literature reviews

	Narrative Literature Reviews	Systematic Literature Reviews
Focus:	Tends to focus on analysing and synthesising conceptual and theoretical findings from a range of sources	Clear focus on appraising the quality of evidence encountered in the literature, often with a view to informing and improving practice outcomes
Explicitness of search strategy:	Often relatively undefined	Clearly defined and systematically applied
Comprehensiveness:	May offer wide coverage, but does not necessarily aspire to be comprehensive	Aims to be as exhaustive as possible
Decisions about inclusion/exclusion of material:	Can be selective and piecemeal	Clear protocol is devised to guide decision making about what is included and excluded
Potential for bias:	'Author(s)' decision-making process is often not explicit so there is scope for bias	Collaborative creation of protocol and transparent process tend to minimise potential for bias
Validity and reliability:	The lack of transparency about how the review has been carried out and the potential for *ad hoc* inclusion of material raises questions about the confidence that can be placed in the findings	Due to the systematic use of the protocol in all stages of the research, and the transparency with which review decisions are described, findings are likely to be valid and reliable
Key advantages:	Narrative reviews can be useful for synthesising ideas, theories and concepts from a broad range of literature	The systematic nature of this work means that it is of a high quality and is repeatable
Key disadvantages:	Quality can be variable, but in trying to assess the quality of narrative reviews one may be frustrated by a lack of transparency in respect of the review process	Although systematic reviews can be good at identifying 'what' works, they may not always be the most appropriate tool for identifying 'why' something works

Which type of review model should you adopt?

If you are carrying out a literature review for an assessment as part of a university-based social work course, it is unlikely that you will have the time, resources or experience to carry out a fully-fledged systematic review. However, as you will hopefully note from Table 1.2, there are aspects of narrative literature reviews that seem relatively weak or inconsistent in comparison to systematic reviews. So, with this in

mind, we would tend towards a position outlined by Aveyard (2010: 16), which recommends that students aspire to the same levels of *transparency* required in a systematic review, while recognising that it is usually not possible to achieve the same level of comprehensive coverage.

If you are a social work practitioner or research student and you are preparing a literature review as groundwork for your own empirical study, then it would be useful to familiarise yourself more fully with the requirements for producing a systematic review. Even if you decide that it is not feasible to carry out a systematic review, the principles will help you to produce a more rigorous narrative review.

ACTIVITY

SCIE flowchart

To get a quick overview of the stages involved in carrying out a systematic review according to Social Care Institute for Excellence's guidelines, have a look at the 'Flowchart of systematic review process' in *SCIE Systematic Research Reviews: Guidelines* (Rutter et al., 2010: 10). This flowchart is also available at: www.scie.org.uk/publications/researchresources/rr01.asp

What do you think is the significance of each stage?

Methods Used in Literature Reviewing

Literature reviewing involves a number of different activities and processes, which become significant at different stages of the review process. The organisation of the chapters of this book broadly reflects the order in which you would normally carry out these activities and processes. Each activity will require the reviewer to make decisions about what particular methods to use.

Search methods

Searching for literature can involve multiple methods, such as:

- manual searching – searching by hand using paper-based journals
- electronic database searching – making use of multiple ways of searching fields and records
- keyword searches – experimenting with different combinations of words
- boolean operators – using special Boolean terms to alter the scope of the search
- developing, applying and revising exclusion and inclusion criteria.

It's likely that you will have come across many of these methods before in relation to literature searching that you will have done for other academic assignments. However, learning to be more structured and organised in the way that you carry out searches can take some practice. Chapter 4 contains some tips and advice to help you with this.

Data extraction methods

The purpose of data extraction is 'to extract the findings from each study in a consistent manner to enable later synthesis, and to extract information to enable quality appraisal so that the findings can be interpreted' (Rutter et al., 2010: 47). In other words, the data extraction process allows the reviewer to:

- pull out relevant findings and data from each of the selected studies
- compare, contrast and pull together findings where appropriate.

To do this, the literature reviewer must first identify what kinds of data are of interest, and then devise a consistent approach to identifying and extracting this data from the literature under review. This data may be either quantitative or qualitative, or a mixture of both.

For systematic literature reviews, it is common to use a special 'data extraction form', which aims to ensure that a consistent, objective and unbiased approach is taken. For the same reasons, the data extraction process may be undertaken by two or more reviewers. The *SCIE Systematic Research Reviews: Guidelines* (Rutter et al., 2010: 91–4) includes a sample data extraction form which outlines the kinds of information that may need to be recorded, including:

1. **Publication details** (e.g. author name, year of publication, title, etc.)
2. **Details about the nature of the study** (e.g. aims, questions addressed, site of research, target population, theories/models used, etc.)
3. **Details about the nature of practice interventions** (e.g. type and aim of intervention, practice setting, rationale, implementation issues, etc.)
4. **Outcomes and results** (e.g. how outcomes are measured, what the outcomes were, what the strengths/limitations of the study were).

Issues in data extraction

Although there are clearly many strengths to using such a detailed and systematic approach to data extraction, one of the potential challenges is that if the data extraction form is not designed appropriately, it may not always 'fit' or 'map' very closely the range of literature you are likely to come across. This may make the later stages of comparison and synthesis very difficult. So, unless you are completing a fully-fledged systematic review, you may need to adopt a more pragmatic and flexible approach to data extraction.

The ways in which quantitative data might be extracted from research papers and studies (essentially you are dealing with numerical and statistical data) may seem fairly obvious, but it is also possible to extract qualitative data in a consistent and systematic way. For instance, the SCIE report, *Using Qualitative Research in Systematic Reviews: Older People's Views of Hospital Discharge* (Fisher et al., 2006), provides an example of how a qualitative approach was used in the context of a systematic review. Other examples of the methodological issues involved in attempting to bring

together insights and findings from a range of different research designs are provided in the report *Using Evidence from Diverse Research Designs* (Popay and Roen, 2003).

Critical appraisal methods

In appraising the literature you are aiming to:

- form a judgement about whether a particular publication is relevant to the topic of your literature review
- assess whether you think that the findings and implications are reliable and valid.

The focus of the critical appraisal is on the way in which the *research* has been carried out, as opposed to the effectiveness of any intervention reported on. Literature reviewers will often develop or adopt critical appraisal tools to assist them in carrying out a thorough and consistent appraisal process.

For your own literature review processes you will need to spend some time considering what kind of appraisal criteria are most appropriate to your review. Rutter et al. (2010) have identified some general issues that they would expect to be addressed in a systematic review appraisal tool for empirical studies. These include the following:

- Has the research been designed in such a way that can appropriately address the question?
- Did services users and carers have input into the design of the study?
- Was the research carried out in an ethical manner (e.g. with informed consent, etc.)?
- What kind of sampling method was used and was this appropriate for the study?
- Were all participants present throughout the study or did some discontinue? If so, what were the reasons for this?
- Were those involved in service/intervention delivery also involved in data collection and analysis?
- Have all the issues outlined at the outset of the study been addressed?
- Have the authors declared any interests (i.e. potential for gain or profit)?

Appraisal tools for qualitative studies are often developed specifically for the job in hand.

CASE STUDY

Devising appraisal criteria

For their worked example of a systematic review on older people's views of hospital discharge, Fisher et al. (2006) identify four markers that they used in assessing the quality of the papers that they accumulated through their searching process. These were:

1. **Strength of the research design** – how appropriate was the design for addressing the research questions that were identified?
2. **Centrality of older people's views** – this criterion reflects that aim of the study, which was to identify 'older people's own views and concepts, expressed in their own words, in accounts structured as they wished' (2006: 26).

3. **Quality of analysis and reporting** – was there sufficient depth and detail included in the papers to suggest confidence in the findings that were presented?
4. **Generalisability** – did the papers contain information in relation to the contextual factors which might impact on the study findings, and 'permit some generalisation beyond the immediate context in which the data were collected' (2006: 25)?

They then used a grid containing these four criteria to help them appraise the quality of the 15 studies they were focusing on.

We will return to this issue of critical appraisal in more detail in Chapter 6.

Methods for synthesis

Synthesis means 'bringing together', and in relation to literature reviews it describes the process of drawing together the data and findings from the literature in order to address or answer the review question. Table 1.3 provides a summary of some of the key synthesis methods, as identified by Rutter et al. (2010).

Table 1.3   Summary of the key synthesis methods identified by Rutter et al. (2010)

Method	Characteristics
Non-empirical studies method	– Relates to material which does not report on empirical studies, but which may contain information or perspectives useful for a literature review – Difficult to apply appraisal criteria to this, so general advice is to avoid treating such material as data or evidence
Statistical meta-analysis method	– Data from a number of studies are extracted and combined, allowing reviewers to carry out statistical analysis on this combined data – Allows broad generalisations to be made above the level of individual studies – Complex process, usually requiring the skills of an experienced statistician
Narrative synthesis method	– Concerned with establishing patterns and relationships between data – Seeks to assess the quality of the data – Reflects on the robustness of the synthesis process – Useful for working with diverse data
Qualitative data synthesis (QDS)	– Used with qualitative data – Common themes are identified across qualitative studies – Transparent, consistent approach differentiates it from 'narrative' synthesis method
Mixed methods synthesis	– Draws on a number of the other approaches – Synthesis is addressed from a number of perspectives – Can mitigate against limitations of any one particular method

Consider the case study below to see how one of these synthesis methods was applied in practice.

Qualitative Data Synthesis (QDS) in action

Fisher et al.'s (2006: 32–48) approach to synthesis was to use an 'interpretive' approach based on identifying and testing concepts across the studies they considered. They used a method of coding the data in order to clearly identify the themes and concepts that emerged from the individual studies. They then organised their coded data into three levels, as follows:

1. **Concepts/themes** – e.g. illness had an impact in making older people feel weak and tired
2. **Second-order concepts (interpretations)** – e.g. older people's capacity for assertiveness is undermined by physical dependency
3. **Third-order interpretations/hypotheses** – e.g. notions of expertise legitimate power.

Whichever method of synthesis is used, the intention should be to remain as transparent as possible about how it is being carried out, how consistency of approach is being ensured, and what the respective strengths and limitations of the method are.

Brief Anatomy of a Literature Review

Literature review length and structure

Literature reviews are usually quite substantial pieces of work, by which we mean they are normally longer than standard essays or assignments. One practical reason for this is that there is normally quite a lot to write about as you have (hopefully) taken a broad view of a topic, based on a reasonably comprehensive reading of the relevant literature. If you are completing a literature review as part of an academic course, you will be given clear guidance about how long the literature review should be.

Table 1.4   A typical literature review structure

Element	Function
Abstract/Summary/ Executive summary (approx. 250 words)	A brief overview of the key aspects of the literature review.
Introduction	Introduces the main topics and 'sets the scene' for the literature review.
Review methodology	Comments on the ways in which the review process was carried out. Considers searching, critical appraisal and synthesis, and any critical or methodological frameworks applied.
Literature review	The main body of the literature review, where the reviewer gets to grips with drawing out the main areas of discussion.

Element	Function
Discussion	The part where the reviewer discusses the significance, relevance and implications of what they have established in the literature review.
Conclusions	A summary of the literature review findings.
Reference list	A comprehensive, alphabetical list of all sources referred to in the literature review.

A typical literature review structure is shown in Table 1.4, although it's important to note that not all literature reviews will follow this format. There are often particular stipulations about how systematic reviews should be structured which may differ from this model (e.g. SCIE Systematic Reviews, Cochrane Reviews, etc.). If you are completing a review for an academic assignment, we would normally expect that you would be given specific guidance about the required structure.

We will cover the kinds of writing skills required to successfully complete each of these sections in Chapter 8.

Research Literacy

In order to review the literature successfully, you will need to be confident that you understand a few fundamental principles about how research is carried out within the social sciences. The reason for this is that a large proportion of the academic literature that you will be reading will be accounts of academic or practitioner-led research carried out within the health and social care field.

As a literature reviewer your job is not simply to read and digest this material (although this certainly forms part of the process). Instead, you will need to make critical and evaluative judgements about the methods, data, analysis, discussion and conclusions put forward by their respective authors. This is a challenging task at the best of times, but will be even trickier if you have not yet fully grasped some of the fundamental principles of research.

If you are an undergraduate or postgraduate social work student, you are likely to have studied research principles and methods by the time you come to undertake a literature review. However, if you have been out of education for some time, or are approaching literature reviews as a social work practitioner new to research, it would be worth reading a text such as *Research Skills for Social Work* by Andrew Whittaker (2009). As we progress through the book we will provide quick definitions and explanations of any specialist research jargon.

Ideas for Taking Things Further

1. Search for a research paper or article that is focused on the topic of your own literature review (or if this is not appropriate at this stage, choose a social work-related topic). Read it through and then have a go at applying Pawson et al.'s (2003) TAPUPAS criteria to test the quality of the evidence.

2. Read the SCIE report *Using Systematic Reviews to Improve Social Care* (Macdonald, 2003). It is only 21 pages long and will give you a thorough understanding of the nature of systematic reviews in social care.

3. For more discussion of some of the challenges of using systematic reviews in social care, read *Systematic Reviews: What Have They Got to Offer Evidence-based Policy and Practice?* (Boaz et al., 2002).

Going grey!

1. The piece of work aimed to draw together findings from smaller-scale research projects on drug prevention among young people and responses to local contexts that were not widely discussed in existing published work.

2. The researchers focused on grey literature because it has the potential to:

   i.   give an up-to-date and detailed account of current drugs activity.

   ii. be more reflective of the fast-changing and locally influenced nature of drugs-related activity.

   iii. provide a greater level of detail about the process and implementation of policies and interventions.

3. The researchers proceeded by using four search strategies:

   i.   Web searches (in particular, they cite online databases such as Mentor UK)

   ii. Consultation with professional networks (they specifically mention the National Collaborating Centre for Drug Prevention (NCCDP))

   iii. Consultation with Drug Action Teams

   iv. Specialist library and database searches (e.g. DrugScope, Web of Science, MEDLINE, and others).

4. The researchers used critical appraisal criteria so that only studies of relatively high quality (i.e. studies that were well designed and implemented) were examined and to weed out poor quality or poorly executed work.

5. Three limitations of the grey literature identified by the researchers were:

   i.   Many projects were felt to rely on intuition rather than evidence of what works.

   ii. Some made reference to 'questionable' research evidence or approaches.

   iii. Indicators of success were based on arbitrary outcome variables, making it difficult to draw more general conclusions.

Chapter Summary

- We have considered the nature of knowledge and evidence in relation to social care knowledge and practice.
- We have explored what is meant by 'the literature' and have considered the nature and value of 'grey literature'.
- We have considered the different roles that a literature review typically performs, and have looked at the qualities and merits of narrative and systematic literature reviews.
- We have briefly looked at the different methodologies involved in carrying out a literature review.

Further Reading and Useful Resources

Aveyard, H. (2010) *Doing a Literature Review in Health and Social Care: A Practical Guide*. Maidenhead: Open University Press. (See Chapter 1, 'Why do a literature review in health and social care?', for additional reading about what literature reviews are and why they are useful in health and social care.)

Boaz, A., Ashby, D. and Young, K. (2002) *Systematic Reviews: What Have They Got to Offer Evidence-based Policy and Practice?* London: Economic and Social Research Council. (This academic paper considers the application of systematic reviews to social policy and practice, as well as the opportunities and challenges that this entails.)

Cochrane Collaboration Open Learning Material on Systematic Reviews available at: www.cochrane-net.org/openlearning/HTML/mod0.htm. (This online tutorial is designed to better equip those who are about to embark on a Cochrane systematic review. We suggest you might like to dip into various sections of it in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of what is required in the process of carrying out a systematic review.)

Gough, D., Oliver, S. and Thomas, J. (2012) *An Introduction to Systematic Reviews*. London: Sage. (This very detailed and comprehensive guide to systematic reviews addresses their use both in health and social care contexts.)

Ridley, D. (2008) *The Literature Review: A Step-by-Step Guide for Students*. London: Sage. (Although this book is not specifically focused on social work, Chapters 1 and 2 provide a broad and very readable introduction to what literature reviews are and why they are used.)

Whittaker, A. (2009) *Research Skills for Social Work*. Exeter: Learning Matters. (This book provides an overview of research skills for social work, and Chapter 2 provides a complete summary of the literature review process.)

The Research Mindedness website has been developed with funding from the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) in order to 'help students and practitioners of social care and social work make greater and more effective use of research in their studies and in practice' (SCIE/CHST, n.d.). It has been designed in such a way that you can dip in and out of sections that are most relevant to you. It can be accessed at: www.resmind.swap.ac.uk/index.htm (NB: Since 2005, this website has no longer been actively developed.)

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