Conducting a Scoping Review

What is a scoping review?

Before conducting a systematic review or meta-analysis, researchers start with a scoping review. This process is used at the planning stage to:

1. Estimate the number of studies eligible for systematic review.
2. Assess feasibility of a systematic review.
3. Refine the research question: broadening to ensure adequate literature, narrowing to ensure feasibility.

Identify *a broad research question and search terms*

Researchers first define a broad question of interest. Starting with simple key terms from this broad question, researchers conduct a naïve search for relevant literature and mine resulting abstracts and titles for additional keywords.

Search and retrieve *studies from one or more databases*

Using the full set of search terms, researchers conduct a comprehensive search using databases that likely warehouse the targeted literature. Doing so gives researchers an estimate of the number of potentially relevant studies.

Select *studies randomly from the retrieved set to reduce screening burden*

From the retrieved results, a random subset of studies is selected for further eligibility screening. The total number of studies selected is based on the resources available (e.g., 100 studies or 10% of the studies).

Screen *based on proposed eligibility criteria*

Starting with simple inclusion criteria, researchers first pilot screen a common set of retrieved results and discuss any discrepancies in screening. Upon finalizing the inclusion criteria, each researcher screens a portion of the total retrieved results, marking those that are eligible for inclusion.

Extrapolate *number of expected studies based on screening results*

Researchers can then use the percentage of eligible studies to extrapolate and estimate the total number of eligible studies, allowing for judging the feasibility of conducting the review.

Refine *research question based on extrapolation*

Based on the feasibility investigation, researchers may refine their inclusion criteria and research question. This process can cycle multiple rounds before researchers have a feasible and refined research question ready for a systematic review or meta-analysis.

After this process, the review team will have a feasible, refined research question ready to propose for a systematic review and meta-analysis.

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