

## 578X8 – Systematic Review

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Systematic reviews of research evidence have been described as ‘the cornerstone of evidence based policy and practice in modern welfare democracies’ (Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) (Fisher et al, 2006, p. vi)<sup>1</sup>. They have become increasingly widespread in applied social sciences, and popular with policy makers and funders because they are designed to answer focussed research questions and bring rigour and transparency to gathering, appraising and synthesising research evidence. The Department for International Development, the Department of Health, and the Department for Education, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Social Care Institute for Excellence are among those who have recently funded systematic reviews on diverse policy and practice relevant issues

Systematic reviews are distinctive from ‘traditional’ literature reviews because they are question-led, conducted according to clearly stated standards and protocols, and aim to be transparent, replicable and capable of updating. They involve exhaustive searches of all relevant literature, and use explicit criteria to include and exclude research for review. Originally, systematic reviews included only quantitative research and usually only randomized controlled trials. Increasingly, however, other approaches that include qualitative research in review have also become established. So the methods used for appraising the quality of research evidence vary with the kind of research included, as do methods for synthesising research evidence, which range from narrative to statistical meta-analysis. Systematic reviews have had many critics. Not all, but many of the criticisms can be allayed by the fact that these reviews can now gather the best of both qualitative and quantitative research evidence, to inform complex interventions with complex problems.

This course is offered both as an Advanced module on the MSc in Social Research Methods, and as a stand-alone Short Course. It is designed for research students and other researchers who want to develop their understanding and hands-on skills in systematic reviewing, and more generally to develop their critical approach to research literature review. Both David Orr and Elaine Sharland have established experience in conducting systematic and other literature reviews, and will draw directly on this experience in their teaching. Participants in the course will focus on a chosen research question in their own field in order to engage directly in doing the methods of systematic reviewing: searching, screening and selecting the research literature, data extraction/quality appraisal, and research synthesis. At the same time, they will be asked to look critically at the approach they are taking, and to engage with critical debates. In combination, taught input and guided activities across the two workshops will enable participants to develop the skills involved in systematic reviewing, and to introduce greater rigour and critical reflection into their own approach to literature reviewing.

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher, M., Qureshi, H., Hardyman, W., & Homewood, J. (2006). *Using qualitative research in systematic reviews: Older people’s views of hospital discharge*. How Knowledge Works in Social Care. Report 9, London: SCIE.

## Workshop 1:

For those who are less familiar with the background, the first workshop will start with a brief introduction to systematic reviews, different approaches to undertaking them, and key areas of critical debate. We will then examine the process of setting suitable research questions for systematic review, and some of the conceptual and strategic challenges involved. The primary focus of the day is on the development and implementation of search strategies to identify relevant studies, and the application of inclusion / exclusion criteria to screen out those that are not of interest to the review.

Participants will be encouraged to apply this learning to their own research question and interests, and this will form the basis for a short informal assignment to be undertaken in preparation for the second workshop. Participants will be asked to conduct a limited search and screening of research literature relevant to their own research question, and from this select and read two key empirical research articles, with a view to their methodology and content

## Workshop 2:

This workshop will focus first on 'data extraction,' which is the process whereby research is quality appraised and relevant research evidence drawn from it. Participants will be asked to adapt an existing data extraction *pro forma* to create one suitable for use with the articles they have selected in order to address their chosen research question. We will explore the challenges and best strategies for doing this, and then move on to look at how research evidence from several different research studies can be brought together in a coherent, useful synthesis. Throughout this process, we will continue to consider some of the critical issues raised in Workshop 1, including the place of theory in synthesis of research evidence.

By the end of the workshops, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate a systematic understanding of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of selected systematic review techniques in the social sciences.
- Utilise selected systematic review techniques to collect or analyse social data.

## Indicative Reading

Boaz, A., Ashby, A. and Young, K. (2002) *Systematic Reviews: What have they got to offer evidence based policy and practice?* London: ESRC UK Centre for Evidence Based Policy and Practice

Hagen-Zanker, J., M. Duvendack, R. Mallett and R. Slater (2012) *Briefing Paper: Making systematic reviews work for international development.* Available at [www.odi.org.uk/slrc](http://www.odi.org.uk/slrc)

Petticrew, M. and Roberts, H. (2006) *Systematic reviews in the social sciences: A practical guide.* Oxford: Blackwell

Sharland, E. (2012) 'Systematic Review,' in M. Gray, J. Midgely, and S. Webb (eds.) *Handbook of Social Work.* London: Sage

<sup>1</sup> Fisher, M., Qureshi, H., Hardyman, W., & Homewood, J. (2006). *Using qualitative research in systematic reviews: Older people's views of hospital discharge.* How Knowledge Works in Social Care. Report 9, London: SCIE.