Understanding Literature Reviews: A Guide for Enhancing Nursing Practice Globally

Abstract

Background:
Literature reviews are essential in nursing for integrating research into practice, informing clinical guidelines, and shaping health policy. They provide a comprehensive synthesis of available evidence, supporting nurses in making informed decisions that improve patient care. Understanding the different types of literature reviews—narrative, systematic, and scoping—is crucial for selecting the most appropriate method for specific clinical questions.

Aim:
This paper aims to explore the characteristics, strengths, and limitations of narrative, systematic, and scoping reviews, and to highlight their significance in nursing practice globally.

Discussion:
Narrative reviews offer broad, flexible overviews of topics but lack methodological rigor, leading to potential bias. Systematic reviews use a structured approach to provide high-quality, reliable evidence by synthesising data from multiple studies, making them valuable for clinical decision-making and guideline development. Scoping reviews map the scope of research on emerging topics, identifying gaps and future research priorities, though they do not typically assess the quality of included studies.

Conclusion:
Understanding the differences between these types of literature reviews enables nurses to effectively use the most appropriate review type for their needs. This knowledge is essential for evidence-based practice, supporting the delivery of high-quality patient care and informing clinical and policy decisions.

Implications for Practice:
For nurses worldwide, literature reviews are vital tools that guide evidence-based practice, enhance clinical decision-making, and contribute to professional development. By engaging with literature reviews, nurses can stay informed about the latest research, improve patient outcomes, and participate in the advancement of nursing knowledge globally.

Introduction

In nursing, keeping up-to-date with current research is vital for delivering high-quality patient care and making informed clinical decisions (Adjoa Kumah et al., 2022). Literature reviews serve as a crucial tool in this process by analysing research findings, guiding clinical practice, and shaping health policy. They are essential for several key reasons: advancing academic knowledge, developing workplace policies, enhancing in-house education, and improving care delivery.

Literature reviews come in various forms, each with distinct methodologies and objectives. The diversity among them, including narrative reviews, systematic reviews, and scoping reviews, means that understanding their specific purposes and methods is critical for effective research utilisation in nursing practice. For instance, narrative reviews offer a broad overview of a topic without a strict methodological framework, while systematic reviews adhere to rigorous protocols to provide high-quality evidence, and scoping reviews map out the research landscape on emerging topics.

This paper aims to elucidate the different types of literature reviews, highlighting their specific methods and purposes. It will address the gaps in current knowledge by providing a comprehensive comparison of these review types and discussing their relevance to nursing practice. By examining narrative, systematic, and scoping reviews, this paper will clarify how each type contributes to the broader research landscape, informs clinical practice, and supports policy development.

Understanding these distinctions is crucial for nurses who need to navigate the evolving research landscape effectively. This paper will detail why these review types were chosen, their respective strengths and limitations, and their implications for nursing practice globally. By providing this detailed analysis, the paper seeks to enhance the application of literature reviews in improving patient care and guiding evidence-based practice.

Importance of Literature Reviews for Nurses

Literature reviews are vital for evidence-based practice (EBP), a cornerstone of high-quality patient care (Engle et al., 2021). By synthesising research, they enable nurses to integrate the best evidence into their clinical decision-making, bridging the gap between research and practice. This ensures patient care is grounded in the most recent and relevant scientific findings. Greenhalgh (2019) highlights that incorporating research evidence into clinical practice through literature reviews ensures effective and evidence-based patient care.

Clinical Guidelines and Protocols

Systematic reviews are crucial for developing clinical guidelines and protocols, which are essential for nurses. These reviews compile data from multiple studies to draw robust conclusions, forming the basis for guidelines that standardise care and improve patient outcomes. Bettany-Saltikov (2016) discusses how systematic reviews inform best practices, ensuring that clinical guidelines are updated and nurses align their practice with the latest evidence, enhancing patient care quality and consistency.

Policy Development

Literature reviews, especially systematic ones, are key to establishing health policy. For nurses involved in policymaking or advocacy, understanding and using literature reviews is essential for defining effective, evidence-based health strategies. Munn et al. (2018) emphasise that systematic reviews provide a comprehensive overview of existing research, identify gaps, and synthesise

evidence to influence policy decisions. This ensures health policies are grounded in evidence, leading to better health outcomes. Nurses skilled in conducting and interpreting literature reviews can significantly contribute to developing effective health policies.

Professional Development

Engaging in literature reviews is crucial for nurses' continuous professional development. Regularly reviewing literature enhances clinical competence and keeps nurses informed about the latest trends and research findings. Aveyard (2019) notes that literature reviews are a valuable resource for lifelong learning, enabling nurses to stay knowledgeable and up-to-date in their practice. This fosters a culture of continuous improvement and professional growth in nursing.

Research and Academic Work

For nurses in research or academic fields, literature reviews are indispensable. They provide a comprehensive background for studies, help identify research gaps, and formulate research questions. Whittemore and Knafl (2005) stress the importance of literature reviews in establishing a solid foundation for research projects. By highlighting existing knowledge and identifying areas needing more research, literature reviews guide researchers in designing relevant and effective studies. This process enhances nursing knowledge and ensures that research efforts address pertinent issues.

Types of Literature Reviews

Narrative Reviews

Narrative reviews, also known as traditional or descriptive reviews, provide a broad overview of a topic by summarising and synthesising results from various studies without a strict methodological framework (Greenhalgh, 2019). Unlike systematic reviews, they do not follow a predetermined protocol or set criteria for selecting studies (Pae, 2015). Instead, they rely on the author's expertise and interpretation, making them more subjective. The main goal of narrative reviews is to offer a comprehensive overview of a topic, identify trends, and highlight key research (Jahan et al., 2016). They are particularly valuable for gaining a general understanding of a broad topic. Narrative reviews review the research landscape, highlighting significant contributions, and provide a narrative analysis of the available literature (Sukhera, 2022). This type of review is especially useful in the early stages of research when exploring a new area or preparing for a more structured review (Cronin et al., 2008; Aveyard, 2019).

Narrative reviews are characterised by their flexible approach, allowing for the incorporation of a wide range of sources, such as empirical studies, theoretical papers, and grey literature, providing a comprehensive overview of the topic (Paes, 2017). However, this flexibility means the process is less transparent and reproducible than systematic reviews (Greenhalgh, 2019). When conducting a narrative review, authors typically start with a broad literature search, using their knowledge and experience to select relevant studies (Sukhera, 2022). The inclusion and exclusion criteria are often not explicitly stated, and the review process may evolve as new insights emerge. The findings are synthesised into a narrative that aims to provide a cohesive story or argument rather than a quantitative summary of results. This synthesis is influenced by the author's interpretation of the literature (Cronin et al., 2008).

One of the main strengths of narrative reviews is their ability to provide a broad and flexible synthesis of research, making them useful for gaining a general understanding of a topic (Sukhera,

2022). For example, a narrative review of nurse-led interventions on patient outcomes could draw from various studies, including randomised controlled trials, qualitative research, and policy reports (Eckert et al., 2023). This approach allows the author to present a comprehensive picture of the field, identifying common themes, significant findings, and areas needing more research. By using a wide range of evidence, narrative reviews can provide a thorough understanding of complex topics (Aveyard, 2019). Despite their strengths, narrative reviews have limitations (Harvey et al., 2021). The subjective nature and lack of systematic methodology can lead to bias, affecting the reliability and validity of the findings. The selection of studies is often influenced by the author's opinion, leading to selective reporting and incomplete representation of the literature. This subjectivity can also affect the interpretation of results, with the author's views and experiences shaping the narrative synthesis (Greenhalgh, 2019; Jesson et al., 2011).

The lack of transparency and reproducibility in narrative reviews makes it difficult for other researchers to verify the findings or replicate the review process (Greenhalgh et al., 2018). This can limit their ability to inform evidence-based practice and policy decisions. In contrast to systematic reviews, which provide a more rigorous and objective synthesis of evidence, narrative reviews are less reliable as high-quality evidence (Sukhera, 2022). Narrative reviews are particularly valuable as they provide an accessible and comprehensive analysis of the literature on a given topic (Pryce-Miller, 2015). Keeping up to date with the latest developments in nursing practice and healthcare is essential. Narrative reviews can help nurses understand complex issues, such as social determinants of health, patient-centered care, and integrating new technologies into clinical practice (Cronin et al., 2008; Aveyard, 2019). Additionally, narrative reviews can provide a strong foundation for professional development by highlighting key research and trends in nursing. They can serve as a starting point for more detailed research, enabling nurses to identify gaps in the literature and areas needing further investigation. Engaging in narrative reviews can enhance nurses' critical thinking abilities and help them apply evidence-based knowledge to improve patient care and outcomes (Jesson et al., 2011).

Systematic Reviews

Systematic reviews are known for their rigorous and transparent methodology, aimed at identifying, evaluating, and synthesising all relevant studies on a specific research question (Sriganesh et al., 2016). Their goal is to reduce bias and provide high-quality evidence to inform practice and policy (Bettany-Saltikov, 2016). What sets systematic reviews apart is their adherence to a predefined protocol and structured approach, enhancing reproducibility and credibility. The primary purpose of a systematic review is to answer a research question by collecting and critically analysing all relevant studies (Ahn & Kang, 2018). This method helps in analysing existing evidence, identifying gaps in the literature, and offering a comprehensive and impartial analysis of research results. For nurses, systematic reviews are crucial as they provide solid evidence to guide clinical decision-making, improve patient care, and support evidence-based practice (Higgins & Green, 2011).

The methodology of systematic reviews is characterised by a structured and predetermined protocol, including comprehensive search strategies, explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria, and rigorous quality assessment of included studies (Shaheen et al., 2023). The process typically begins with formulating a research question, which may be framed using various frameworks such as PICO (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome) (Schardt et al., 2007), but other frameworks like PICOS (including Setting) or SPICE (Setting, Perspective, Intervention, Comparison, Evaluation) could also be employed depending on the review's focus. A thorough search strategy is then designed to identify all relevant studies, which may involve searching multiple databases and sometimes grey literature to ensure a comprehensive overview, although the inclusion of grey literature depends on the specific review design and objectives (Higgins & Green, 2011; Bettany-Saltikov, 2016). Studies

are selected based on predefined criteria to ensure consistency and reduce selection bias. Each study is critically evaluated for quality using standardised tools. In addition to the Cochrane risk of bias tool (Higgins, 2011), other assessment tools such as the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale (NOS) for observational studies, the AMSTAR (A Measurement Tool to Assess Systematic Reviews) for assessing the methodological quality of systematic reviews, and the Jadad scale for evaluating randomised controlled trials may also be used, depending on the type of studies. Data from the selected studies are then extracted and summarised, either qualitatively or quantitatively through meta-analysis, to provide a comprehensive overview of the evidence. Findings are presented systematically, highlighting the evidence's importance and its implications for practice (Higgins & Green, 2011).

One major strength of systematic reviews is their ability to provide reliable and comprehensive evidence while reducing bias (Sriganesh et al., 2016). The rigorous approach ensures transparency and reproducibility, enhancing the credibility of the findings. For instance, a systematic review on the effectiveness of hand hygiene protocols in reducing hospital-acquired infections would evaluate and synthesise results from multiple trials, providing robust evidence on different hand hygiene interventions. This systematic approach ensures that conclusions are based on comprehensive and impartial analysis, making it a valuable resource for healthcare professionals (Bettany-Saltikov, 2016). However, systematic reviews also have limitations (Uttley et al., 2023). They are time-consuming and resource-intensive, requiring extensive effort for literature searches, study appraisal, and result synthesis. The strict inclusion and exclusion criteria, although necessary to reduce bias, may exclude relevant studies, potentially limiting the findings' scope (Higgins & Green, 2011; Bettany-Saltikov, 2016). Additionally, the quality of a systematic review depends on the quality of the included studies (Al-Khabori & Rasool, 2022).

Systematic reviews are particularly beneficial due to their high-quality evidence, which can inform clinical practice and improve patient outcomes (Pryce-Miller, 2015). A comprehensive and impartial analysis of research results helps nurses stay informed of the latest evidence, enabling best practices in healthcare. Systematic reviews also identify literature gaps, guide future research, and contribute to nursing knowledge (Bettany-Saltikov, 2016). Furthermore, systematic reviews provide robust evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and therapies, ensuring health practices are based on the best available evidence (Moosapour et al., 2021). This enhances patient care quality. By using systematic reviews, nurses can improve their critical thinking abilities and contribute to evidence-based practice (Higgins & Green, 2011).

Scoping Reviews

Scoping reviews examine existing literature on broad topics, identifying key concepts, gaps, and the research scope (Campbell et al., 2023). They are particularly useful in emerging areas where the evidence base is still evolving and a comprehensive overview is needed to inform future research and practice (Munn et al., 2018). The primary purpose of a scoping review is to explore the extent, range, and nature of research on a particular topic. This type of review helps clarify working concepts, conceptual boundaries, and key factors related to the topic (Mak & Thomas, 2022). For nurses, scoping reviews can provide valuable insights into emerging trends and areas of interest, guiding both clinical practice and research efforts (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005).

The process involves a broad research question and a comprehensive search strategy to identify relevant studies, covering various databases and grey literature to ensure a thorough overview (Peters et al., 2015). Studies are selected based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Data is then analysed and charted, summarising key information such as study characteristics, methods, and findings (Gottlieb et al., 2021). Unlike systematic reviews, scoping reviews do not

require a detailed quality assessment of included studies. Instead, they offer a comprehensive overview of current literature, examining research gaps and priorities. Results are presented narratively, often with visual charts or tables showing the research's scope and nature (Peters et al., 2015).

One major advantage of scoping reviews is their ability to provide a broad overview of the existing literature on a topic (Mak & Thomas, 2022). For example, a review of digital health interventions for chronic disease management could examine the types and effectiveness of various technologies used in this area. This would provide an overview of available interventions, highlighting the most utilised technologies and identifying gaps in the evidence. Such insights can guide future research, inform clinical practice, and provide evidence-based guidelines for managing chronic diseases with digital health tools (Tricco et al., 2016). However, scoping reviews do not typically evaluate the quality of included studies, which can affect the reliability of their findings. The broad nature of scoping reviews may result in a less detailed analysis compared to systematic reviews, potentially overlooking important details and methodological rigor (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The lack of a comprehensive quality assessment means that scoping reviews cannot provide definitive answers about the effectiveness of interventions or treatments. Instead, they offer a preliminary examination of the evidence base, useful for identifying research gaps but insufficient for clinical decision-making on their own.

Scoping reviews are valuable as they provide a comprehensive overview of the literature on emerging topics, helping to identify gaps and set future research priorities (Pollock et al., 2021). The comprehensive mapping of evidence supports developing new clinical guidelines and policies, ensuring that nursing practices align with the latest trends and innovations in healthcare (Munn et al., 2018). Engaging in scoping reviews allows nurses to stay informed of the latest developments in their field, enhance their understanding of emerging topics, and contribute to nursing knowledge. This can lead to improved patient care and outcomes, as well as the adoption of innovative practices and technologies in healthcare.

Practical Guidance for Utilising Literature Reviews

Choosing the Right Type of Review

Selecting the appropriate type of literature review is crucial, as it depends on the review's purpose. Systematic reviews are ideal for answering specific clinical questions with precision and reliability due to their rigorous and transparent methods. In contrast, scoping reviews are better suited for exploring broad topics or emerging areas where the evidence base is still developing. Munn et al. (2018) suggest that nurses consider their research questions and objectives when choosing the type of literature review, ensuring the chosen methodology aligns with their goals.

Critical Appraisal Skills

Nurses need strong critical appraisal skills to assess the quality and relevance of evidence. Tools like the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) checklists (Critical Appraisal Skills Programme 2018) offer structured frameworks for evaluating the methodology and validity of studies. Greenhalgh (2019) underscores the importance of critical assessment, enabling nurses to distinguish high-quality evidence from studies with methodological flaws. By honing these skills, nurses can make more informed decisions and incorporate robust evidence into their practice.

Application to Practice

Effectively applying findings from literature reviews to clinical practice is essential. This involves not only understanding the evidence but also evaluating its impact on specific clinical contexts. Bettany-Saltikov (2016) emphasises the need for nurses to translate research findings into practical strategies suitable for their care settings. This application requires critical thinking and the ability to adapt evidence-based recommendations to the specific needs of patients and clinical environments.

Collaboration and Consultation

Collaboration with colleagues, such as research nurses and academic staff, significantly enhances the effectiveness of literature reviews. Consulting with experts offers deeper insights and aids in the practical application of evidence. Aveyard (2019) highlights that collaborative efforts in reviewing and interpreting literature contribute to a more comprehensive understanding and more effective implementation of research findings. Through sharing knowledge, discussing interpretations, and developing strategies together, nurses can better integrate evidence into their practice.

Continuous Learning

Staying current with new literature reviews and updates to existing ones is essential for maintaining an informed approach. Nurses should incorporate regular reading and engagement with literature reviews into their professional development strategies. Whittemore and Knafl (2005) advocate for a culture of continuous learning, where nurses prioritise staying updated with the latest research and evidence. This commitment to ongoing education ensures that nurses remain at the forefront of their profession, providing high-quality care based on the latest and most relevant evidence.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the importance of literature reviews in nursing by demonstrating how they support high-quality care and informed decision-making through evidence-based practice. The discussion of narrative, systematic, and scoping reviews highlights their distinct purposes: narrative reviews offer broad overviews of topics, systematic reviews provide rigorous and reliable evidence, and scoping reviews explore the extent and nature of research in emerging areas.

By distinguishing between these types, the paper contributes to current knowledge by clarifying how each review type can be effectively utilised in nursing practice. This understanding enables nurses to select the appropriate review type for their specific needs, enhancing their ability to integrate evidence into clinical practice, inform policy development, and identify research gaps.

Ultimately, literature reviews are essential tools for advancing nursing practice, fostering critical thinking, and ensuring that care is guided by the best available evidence. As the healthcare landscape continues to evolve, literature reviews will remain crucial for guiding nursing towards improved patient outcomes and professional excellence.

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