

Literature Reviews in Social Work

Robin Kiteley and
Chris Stogdon



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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.