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KEY CONCEPTS IN CLINICAL EPIDEMIOLOGY

"How-to": scoping review?

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Abstract

Background and Objective: Scoping reviews are a type of evidence synthesis that aims to identify and map the breadth of evidence available on a particular topic, field, concept, or issue, within or across a defined context or contexts. Scoping reviews can contribute to clinical practice guideline development, policy making, reduce research waste by eliminating duplication of research effort, and be a precursor to a systematic review or inform further primary research. This article aims to provide a brief introduction of how to conduct and report scoping reviews.

Study Design and Setting: We will discuss the role and value of scoping reviews within the evidence synthesis ecosystem, the differences and similarities between these reviews and other types of evidence syntheses such as systematic reviews, mapping reviews, evidence and gap maps, and overviews, and how to overcome common challenges often associated in the conduct, reporting, and dissemination of scoping reviews.

Results: Scoping reviews have a role in the evidence ecosystem; however, we need to acknowledge their challenges.

Conclusion: Scoping reviews are a popular form of evidence synthesis, and further research is needed to provide clarity of current methodological challenges.

Keywords: Scoping reviews; Evidence synthesis; Evidence-based health care; Knowledge synthesis; Mapping reviews; Evidence and gap maps; Research methodology

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Plain Language Summary

The best decisions for future research, policy and health care are made by bringing together all the evidence, scoping reviews are one approach that can do this in a transparent and rigorous manner. They are best known for bringing diverse documents all together to be able to map and clarify what evidence exists. This paper provides an overview of how to do a scoping review and when it is the best approach. It discusses some of the challenges that occur when conducting a scoping review and some solutions on how to manage these issues.

1. Background

The increasing complexity of health and healthcare requires additional evidence needs and questions that cannot be answered through systematic reviews of interventions alone [1]. Some of these questions that decision-makers, clinicians, organisations funding research, patient partners, and the public may ask include those related to the extent of the evidence-base and what is currently known. They may be hypothesis generating in nature asking questions such as "How is this concept defined within the literature?" "*What type of research has already been undertaken?" "What policy documents already exist on this matter?" "What strategies and outcomes are being used?" "What methodological approach is being followed within current studies?*" For these types of questions, scoping reviews are the appropriate evidence synthesis methodology.

Scoping reviews are defined as:

> "...a type of evidence synthesis that aims to systematically identify and map the breadth of evidence available on a particular topic, field, concept, or issue, often irrespective of source (ie, primary research, reviews, non-empirical evidence) within or across particular contexts. Scoping reviews can clarify key concepts/definitions in the literature and identify key characteristics or factors related to a concept, including those related to methodological research" [2].

Despite existing methodological guidance for scoping reviews [3] and the development of a reporting standard (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analysis for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR)) [4], several methodological uncertainties and confusion persists regarding this approach. This key concept article will provide information on the role and value of scoping reviews, and the differences between other evidence synthesis approaches. We also address challenges that reviewers can encounter during the conduct and reporting of scoping reviews and provide solutions around how to conduct and report scoping reviews.

2. Scoping reviews in the evidence ecosystem

Scoping reviews are a valuable form of evidence synthesis for the following reasons:

2.1. Reason 1

They allow for the identification of the types of available evidence and research gaps in a field based on a methodologically robust and transparent process [3]. Thus, they are useful for emerging areas of evidence and are an efficient use of limited resources to provide an overview of a field and can reduce research waste by eliminating misinformed duplication of research effort [5].

2.2. Reason 2

They examine how research is conducted or reported on a certain topic or field, and can clarify concepts, definitions, characteristics, or factors related to a field, thus improving clarity for those planning, conducting or using research [6].

2.3. Reason 3

They are being used as part of the process of clinical practice guideline development by identifying existing guidelines which could be adopted or adapted, providing knowledge users with the ability to understand the breadth of the available evidence to help with prioritisation of review questions, identification of contextual factors relevant for recommendations, and guidance regarding potential strategies for implementation and monitoring [7].

2.4. Reason 4

They can be used as a precursor to a systematic review or inform other types of research by helping to identify what evidence exists on a particular topic and what specific questions and inclusion criteria would need to be developed for a subsequent systematic review [3,8].

3. Scoping review team

A scoping review cannot be completed by one person and requires a team. The scoping review team should include content, methodological, and information science experts. A key difference between JBI guidance for scoping reviews and other guidance is the suggestion that the review team include knowledge users throughout the conduct and reporting of the scoping review [9]. Knowledge users are those invested in the production of research, and who may benefit or be impacted by the research, such as academics, patients,

What is new?

Key findings

- Scoping reviews play a key role in the evidence ecosystem.
- There are numerous challenges in the conduct and reporting of scoping reviews.

What this adds to what was known

- The role of scoping reviews within the evidence ecosystem.
- Clarification of the differences between systematic reviews, mapping reviews, evidence and gap maps, and overviews.
- Solutions to known challenges in the conduct and reporting of scoping reviews.

What is the implication and what should change now

- Further research is needed to provide clarity of current methodological challenges.

health care providers, policy makers, research funders, charities and advocacy groups, and other decision-makers.

4. What are the steps involved in conducting a scoping review?

There are nine steps in the conduct of scoping reviews according to JBI (previously Joanna Briggs Institute) guidance. The first three steps occur when reviewers are developing the protocol [3].

1. Defining and aligning the objective/s and question/s
2. Developing and aligning the inclusion criteria with the objective/s and question/s
3. Describing the planned approach to evidence searching, selection, extraction, analysis, and presentation
4. Searching for the evidence
5. Selecting the evidence
6. Extracting the evidence
7. Analysis of the results
8. Presentation of the results
9. Summarising the evidence in relation to the purpose of the review, making conclusions, and noting any implications of the findings [3].

5. Reporting scoping reviews

To improve the transparency of scoping reviews, reviewers should follow PRISMA-ScR [4]. This 20-item checklist breaks down each section of the scoping review and identifies items that are integral for transparent reporting [4]. The PRISMA-ScR is currently in the process of being updated (https://osf.io/489ck) to align with the updated PRISMA guidelines which were released in 2021.

6. The difference and similarities between systematic reviews, scoping reviews, mapping reviews, evidence and gap maps, and overviews

Systematic reviews, scoping reviews, mapping reviews, evidence and gap maps, and overviews are all forms of evidence synthesis which complement each other and serve different purposes within the evidence ecosystem [6]. Table 1 shows the differences and similarities between these review types.

Systematic reviews have a specific and analytical focus of interest, such as the effectiveness of an intervention, the accuracy of a test, or the prognosis of a condition, amongst others [8]. Key features of systematic reviews include a risk of bias assessment of the included evidence, formal synthesis approaches and an assessment of the certainty of the evidence. Therefore, if the intention of the reviewers is to potentially change practice, underpin recommendations or assist in the development of clinical

BOX 1 Case Study: Examining the evidence of Patient Journey Mapping – A Scoping Review

Deciding the difference between a scoping and mapping review can be difficult. There are many examples where a review could be either a scoping or mapping review. One scenario is a scoping review identifying how patient journey mapping research is being undertaken and how it is being described and documented in academic literature [12].

This scoping review may have been a mapping review as the objective indicated that this could be achieved through a high-level and deductive manner. However, a scoping review was considered the more appropriate choice due to the included subquestions.

1. What approaches are being adopted to map patient journeys through health systems?
2. What justifications are provided for undertaking patient journey mapping research?
3. How are studies that use a patient journey mapping methodology in health services described and documented in the academic literature?

These subquestions required more extensive and detailed extractions which could not be achieved through a deductive framework and to categorise the justifications of patient journey mapping a qualitative content analysis approach was required.

Table 1. Differences of evidence synthesis types

	Systematic review	Scoping review	Mapping review	Evidence and gap maps (EGMs)	Overviews
Purpose	Provides a comprehensive synthesis of relevant studies by using rigorous and transparent methods	Provides a comprehensive collection, description and catalog of the available evidence related to the question of interest using transparent methods	Provides a collection, description and catalog of the available evidence related to the question of interest using transparent methods	Provides a systematic evidence synthesis product which visually displays the available evidence and identifies research gaps relevant to a specific research question.	Provides a comprehensive synthesis of relevant systematic reviews by using rigorous and transparent methods
Protocol registration	Recommended	Recommended	Recommended	Recommended	Recommended
Protocol driven	Required	Required	Recommended, however not explicitly stated within guidelines	Recommended, however not explicitly stated within guidelines	Required
Question	Typically, a narrow research question, that is, What is the effectiveness of a particular intervention?	Broad question: What are the characteristics, definitions, factors, and mechanisms related to a particular concept. What do we know about a topic? What types of research exist addressing a particular area, field or topic?	Broad question: What do we know about a topic? What types of research exist addressing a particular area, field or topic? What are the characteristics of this research?	Broad question following PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcomes, and Study design) What is the available evidence on menopausal women and treatment approaches?	Broad question examining evidence from multiple systematic reviews, that is, What is the effectiveness of a particular intervention?
Evidence source/ study design	Dependent on type of systematic review. For example, questions of effectiveness may include randomized controlled trials only. Questions relating to experiences may include qualitative research designs and mixed methods systematic reviews may include both multiple types of study designs.	Identifies and maps evidence, often irrespective of source, type or design Number and type of evidence sources included can vary.	Identifies and maps evidence, often irrespective of source, type or design Number and type of evidence sources included can vary.	Identifies and maps evidence, often irrespective of source, type or design Number and type of evidence sources included can vary.	Systematic reviews. Can also search for additional primary studies not included in the identified systematic reviews (eg, due to date restrictions)
Critical Appraisal/Risk of bias	Yes	Optional but not mandatory	Optional but not mandatory	Optional but not mandatory	Yes
Extraction	Extensive and detailed data extractions, focusing largely on results or findings of individual studies	Extensive and detailed data extractions, generally not focused on findings but on the types of study, information reported, methods, and other characteristics	Extensive and detailed data extractions, focused not on findings but on the types of study, information reported, methods, and other characteristics	Extensive and detailed data extractions, focused not on findings but on the types of study, information reported, methods, and other characteristics	Extensive and detailed data extractions, focusing largely on results or findings of systematic reviews
Analysis	Deductive summary of detailed findings.	Inductive (need to be developed) or	Deductive summary of high-level data with	Deductive summary of high-level data	Deductive summary of detailed findings

(*Continued*)

Table 1. Continued

	Systematic review	Scoping review	Mapping review	Evidence and gap maps (EGMs)	Overviews
	That is, meta-analysis to determine effectiveness of intervention.	deductive (predetermined) analysis (may include basic qualitative content analysis).	predefined codes.	dependent on framework	using predefined codes. Can involve reanalysis of data presented in systematic reviews
Presentation of results	Tables, forest plots, and graphs accompanied by narrative summaries	Tables and other visual summaries (ie, word clouds, bar graphs, etc.) accompanied by a narrative summary. +/− EGMs	Tables and other visual summaries (ie, word clouds, bar graphs, etc.) +/− EGMs	Visual, interactive online output placed on a web-based platform, such as a funders webpage.	Tables, forest plots, and graphs accompanied by narrative summaries
Certainty of Evidence	Dependent on the systematic review. Reviews of effectiveness of interventions- Yes.	No	No	No	Recommended, accepted methods not yet available
Impact	To inform policy and practice, decision making, for incorporation in guidelines, and research	Informs future research priorities, policy and on occasions influence practice	Informs future research priorities	Informs future research priorities and are critical link in building evidence architecture	To inform policy and practice, decision making, for incorporation in guidelines, and research

guidelines then a systematic review approach is the most appropriate form of evidence synthesis [8].

Overviews are very similar to systematic reviews and exhibit many of the same features. The main difference is that overviews search for and summarise existing systematic reviews as opposed to primary studies. In general overviews can serve the same purpose as systematic reviews. However, if the intention of the review is to identify, clarify, map, and report the breadth of evidence available on a particular topic, field, concept, or issue irrespective of source (eg, including other reviews), then a scoping review would be considered the right approach [8].

Scoping reviews, mapping reviews and evidence and gap maps share many common characteristics, including their application to address broad research questions, inclusion of a variety of research sources, and descriptive synthesis approaches [6,10]. Although there may be overlap between the questions they seek to address, they adopt similar yet distinct approaches in answering questions [6]. In Box 1, we describe a scenario in how authors made a choice between these methodological approaches. The similarities and differences between scoping and mapping reviews are an evolving area of methodological development and different approaches are evident within the literature. In some instances, the terms "mapping and scoping" are used interchangeably, in other instances they are described as different types of approaches. Evidence and gap maps are also an approach that share the same goals of describing the extent or landscape of existing evidence but rely developing an agreed framework (matrix) during preparation of a protocol and present findings in an interactive web-based tool. [11].

Scoping reviews, mapping reviews, and evidence and gap maps may differ in the following ways:

- *The nature of the question and objectives.* Scoping reviews can enable inductive approaches to exploring the topic or concept. They do not rely on using high-level predefined categories. Mapping reviews, and particularly evidence and gap maps will not extract textual data or attempt to describe how a concept is used but will record, for example, how often a concept is mentioned. Scoping reviews may include both inductive (questioning) and deductive (testing) objectives, where mapping and evidence and gap map reviews seek to address the latter.
- *Level of extraction:* Scoping reviews often involve extensive and detailed extractions, whereas mapping reviews and evidence and gap maps typically include higher-level data extraction.
- *Level of synthesis:* scoping reviews, mapping reviews and evidence and gap maps may utilise descriptive statistics. However, scoping reviews can move beyond this and may conduct qualitative content analysis to determine characteristics of concepts, definitions, theoretical frameworks, and other variables.
- *Presentation of results and findings:* scoping reviews and mapping reviews will include a descriptive synthesis and are not required to present visual summaries (although this is encouraged), whilst evidence and gap maps do not necessarily require a descriptive synthesis but require visual summaries [6].

Table 2. Challenges and solutions in scoping reviews

Challenges	Potential solution
1. Lack of people trained in scoping review methodology	The JBI Scoping Review Network webpage offers a wealth of resources and educational opportunities regarding the conduct and reporting of scoping reviews.
2. Determining when a scoping review is appropriate	Review authors can utilise the Right Review tool which guides the reviewer through au a series of questions to suggest what review type would be right for your proposed question [14]. Our scoping review network webpage also provides decision-making tools and key guidance when deciding between a scoping review, systematic review, mapping review and evidence and gap map.
3. People conducting scoping reviews when a different type of Knowledge Synthesis would be more appropriate	
4. Difficulties with knowing what data to extract and how to analyse the results	The JBI Scoping Review Methodology group has recently developed guidance within this area [12]. There are also webinars housed on the JBI YouTube page which shows examples of how to extract, analyse and present the results.
5. Presenting the results of scoping reviews	
6. Poor quality of some scoping reviews	Scoping Reviewers should develop an a priori protocol which is publicly available (such as Open Science Framework or FigShare), follow JBI guidance on the conduct of scoping reviews, and report according to the PRISMA-ScR. Where possible, review teams should include topic experts, a librarian, and methodologists [3].
7. Ensuring the conclusions of scoping reviews are not overstretched (ie, for practice or policy recommendations)	Review authors should describe how the findings have added to, or enhanced, knowledge or understanding in their field of enquiry and implications for future research. The involvement of knowledge users can inject an important degree of realism into the formulation of review conclusions [9]. Reviews should include a section outlining the strengths and weaknesses of the review process.
8. Misconceptions on scope and function and lack of editor, peer reviewer, and author understanding of scoping reviews	Training for editors and the research community. A project is currently underway to develop a tool to evaluate the quality of scoping reviews.

7. What are some challenges of scoping reviews and how can we solve them?

Scoping reviews, like all evidence synthesis approaches adopt methods that are rigorous and transparent. There is a misconception that scoping reviews are an ‘‘easier’’ form of evidence synthesis to conduct, as they do not typically conduct critical appraisal or risk of bias assessment of individual studies, nor include complex statistical synthesis methods such as meta-analysis or meta-aggregation [13]. Unfortunately, this supposition appears to have fueled the perception that scoping reviews are inferior to other forms of evidence synthesis such as systematic reviews. Scoping reviews have their own challenges, however, assume that team members will adopt a critical and systematic approach to their enquiries. We have identified eight challenges and their potential solutions regarding scoping reviews as seen in table 2 [14].

An additional challenge in conducting a scoping review relates to large numbers of included sources of evidence, the volume of data to be extracted and the complexity of the planned analyses [15]. To navigate large scoping review authors, consider the following questions.

1. Who do I need to include as part of the review team?
2. Can I be more specific in my question(s) and search strategy to reduce the number of evidence sources that can be included while still answering the original review question?
3. How can I best manage the review?
4. How will I effectively manage the data extraction and analysis stage?
5. How can I best present the included data to answer the review question/s?
6. How and where will I publish this scoping review? [15].

8. Further reading

Reviewers can find more information regarding scoping reviews on the JBI Scoping Review Network Webpage ‘(https://jbi.global/scoping-review-network). This webpage includes templates, guidance, webinars, and infographics that can support reviewers in the conduct, reporting and dissemination of scoping reviews.

We acknowledge that it is not always simple for authors to plan an evidence synthesis to determine what approach is best for their situation. The ‘‘Right Review’’ tool is a website (https://rightreview.knowledgetranslation.net/) that can

assist reviewers to determine the most appropriate form of evidence synthesis, helping to distinguish between systematic reviews and scoping reviews [16,17].

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, scoping reviews are a specific type of evidence synthesis that can be used to answer broad questions from researchers and decision-makers. There are several challenges in the conduct of a scoping review, which will be included in the updated JBI guide to scoping reviews. The PRISMA-ScR can be used to report a scoping review. The JBI scoping review network can be consulted for further information and guidance.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Danielle Pollock: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Conceptualization. **Catrin Evans:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Romy Menghao Jia:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Lyndsay Alexander:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Dawid Pieper:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Érica Brandão de Moraes:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Micah D.J. Peters:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Andrea C. Tricco:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Hanan Khalil:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Christina M. Godfrey:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Ashrita Saran:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Fiona Campbell:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing. **Zachary Munn:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Supervision, Project administration, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

Andrea Tricco is the co-Editor-in-Chief of JCE but not involved with publication decisions. There are no further declarations of interest.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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