



The Essentials of Literature Reviews

FACT SHEET



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The Essentials of Literature Reviews

In community-based research (CBR) an important element of a research project is a Literature Review. A literature review is a survey and analysis of the information printed about the subject you are researching. The review helps a researcher to develop an understanding about what is already known and published about the research topic. Reviewing existing literature helps to get a sense of how others have approached the research topic, may contribute to the analysis of data that will be gathered in a new research project and highlight issues that a research team may wish to address. In a research project, the literature review helps to balance “the use of what is already known with the discovery from the data.” (Morse & Richards, p169) The researcher is not trying to list all of the material published, but to combine and evaluate it according to the guiding concept of the current issue or research question. Literature reviews are useful for research proposal development, framing the research topic within the project or a review can stand alone as a systematic review of what has been published.

“When writing proposals for funding, you are almost always asked to use the published literature to justify the need for your study” (Fink 2005). Both quantitative and qualitative research needs to be conducted rigorously which includes the need for a solid review of what is already known about the research topic. Critical methods for social science review (refer to The Essentials of Evaluating Research Reports: A Fact Sheet) are useful when conducting a literature review for a community-based research project. When reviewing literature related to the research topic, the researcher should assess publications in relation to:

- Whether there is a clear statement of the problem or issue;
- Whether the research question can be answered with quantitative and/or qualitative data;
- Whether any reviews already exist which are comprehensive and current;
- Whether they logically and critically evaluate the published literature (reports); and
- Whether the interpretations are clear and related to [the] original research.

A literature review in the HIV/AIDS field will include materials that have been published by health practitioners, researchers, policy analysts and community health workers. Most often the review is found in the early sections of an essay, research report, or environmental scan or the review may be produced as an independent document. In writing the literature review, the purpose is to convey to the reader what knowledge and ideas have been established, and what the strengths and gaps are in relation to the current research topic. As a piece of writing, the literature review must be defined by a guiding concept such as, for example, the research objective, the problem or issue that is being discussed, or a particular perspective. It is not just a descriptive list of the material available or a set of summaries (called an annotated bibliography). In an Aboriginal CBR project, literature reviews merge the Western scientific perspective with the Aboriginal community level perspective. To influence political

and social change it is critical to meld together a document which reflects the strengths of both Western scientific rigour and Indigenous knowledge, for example the context of knowledge as described by Aboriginal peoples, as demonstrated in the articles by Fletcher (2003) and Smylie and colleagues (2004).

There is a broad range of literature available when conducting a review. For example there may be academic or government journal articles, books, conference proceedings, pamphlets, policy documents, materials from organizations such as CAAN or the National Aboriginal Health Organization, etc. Given the fact that there is not enough time to review everything that has been documented about a topic it is necessary to decide when to stop reviewing and start writing. In general, look for documents that are referenced over and over again. This is a sign that the material is well respected and should be included in the review. When the same themes and observations begin to emerge from all of the materials, this is an indication that you have identified a solid overview of the topic in the existing literature and it is time to start writing the review. Additional references and resources will continue to be discovered throughout the project as other people suggest relevant reading and new issues emerge, these resources can be incorporated into the literature review if relevant.

Aside from enlarging your knowledge about the topic, writing a literature review requires you have skills in two areas:

- Information seeking: the ability to scan the literature efficiently, using manual or computerized methods, to identify a set of useful articles, reports and books.
- Critical appraisal: the ability to apply principles of analysis to identify unbiased and valid studies, both in a Western scientific context and respecting Indigenous knowledge.

A literature review must cover these key points:

- Be organized and related directly to the issue or research question that is being addressed;
- Synthesize results into a summary of what is known and unknown, for both Western scientific and Indigenous knowledge;
- Identify areas of controversy in the literature and differing perspectives; and
- Formulate questions that need further research applying both Western and Indigenous approaches and perspectives.

How to do a literature review:

- Always record the bibliographic references (author, title, publisher and publication date) for the literature you are reviewing as you begin. If you find that you do not directly reference (cite) a source when writing the review, it can still be included in a bibliography;

OVERVIEW

The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network is a national, not-for-profit organization:

- Established in 1997
- Represents over 200 member organizations and individuals
- Governed by a National thirteen member Board of Directors
- A four member Executive Board of Directors
- Provides a National forum for members to express needs and concerns
- Ensures access to HIV/AIDS-related services through advocacy
- Provides relevant, accurate and up-to-date HIV/AIDS information

MISSION STATEMENT

As a key national voice of a collection of individuals, organizations and provincial/territorial associations, CAAN provides leadership, support and advocacy for Aboriginal people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. CAAN faces the challenges created by HIV/AIDS in a spirit of wholeness and healing that promotes empowerment, inclusion, and honours the cultural traditions, uniqueness and diversity of all First Nations, Inuit and Métis people regardless of where they reside.

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- As you review materials, make notes about issues you think your research report should highlight based upon what the literature says on the topic;
- When you feel that you have reviewed enough material that you have a good overview of what has been published about the topic, write up the review; and
- When the literature review is part of a larger project, use the information collected as a basis for understanding the field that you are researching but then set it aside until you return to writing the final project report – the goal of research is to discover something new, not to specifically verify or contradict what is already published.

Systematic Literature Reviews

As described, a literature review offers a synthesis of published literature on a subject. Systematic literature reviews critically evaluate all of the relevant literature, summarize the findings and offer an analysis of the materials overall. For example, Clarke and colleagues (2005) did a systematic review of media articles about HIV/AIDS in Aboriginal print in Canada. They evaluated and analyzed print articles on HIV/AIDS in several Aboriginal media papers, and determined and analyzed the viewpoints and issues that were most commonly presented in the media. The Cochrane Collaboration has conducted systematic reviews on HIV/AIDS (Cochrane library).

Steps for undertaking a systematic review are listed below (Peat 2002):

- Define outcome variables;
- Identify the intervention or topic of interest;
- Decide on a search strategy and literature database(s);
- Define inclusion and exclusion criteria (what to keep in and what to leave out) for studies (reports);
- Conduct the search for literature and collect information;
- If possible, review the studies with two independent observers, perhaps members of the research team, to ensure consistency based on inclusion and exclusion criteria;
- Reach consensus about inclusion of studies;
- Review the materials to be included – read, read, read!;
- Pool the data together and conduct analysis; and
- Submit and publish final review.

Conclusion

When the decision has been made to begin a research project it is useful, and often required by funders, to conduct a literature review. Forming a basis of information that already exists about the research topic helps to ensure that the current research project will make a new contribution to understanding the topic. It is rewarding to know that others have also been interested in the topic and helpful to learn about different approaches to answering questions about the topic. Within the Aboriginal community literature may be used in combination with Traditional Knowledge to demonstrate the many kinds of insight that already exist regarding an issue. This is an aspect of the research process that sets the stage for the rest of the project to unfold.

Notes:

A number of sources were consulted in preparing this position paper. The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN) acknowledges the contribution of the following sources:

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