Critical interpretive synthesis: what it is and why it is needed

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Systematic reviews

- Routinisation of processes of review – searching, selection, appraisal, synthesis
- Advantages seen to lie in rigour and transparency of process
- Address the fallibility of informal reviews

Systematic reviews challenge “the author” and emphasise procedure

- Weakness of informal review seen to derive from failures in procedural specification and tendency of reviewer to
  - Be chaotic or negligent in identifying and assessing relevant evidence
  - Construct idiosyncratic theories and marshall evidence in support of these

The standard critique

- SRs fail to recognise the contingencies and fuzzy realities of practice and experience
- SRs tend to answer answerable question rather than useful question
- Counts the things that can be measured, rather than (all) the things that are important
- Too much affinity with controlling agendas of managers and policy-makers

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And may only apply in certain situations

Conventional systematic review

- Is a very good thing
- But only when used for the right questions
- Many of the criticisms apply only when it is inappropriately used for the wrong questions
- Or when it is valorised as the only legitimate way of doing any review

Sources of frustration with SRs

- Tendency to see systematic reviews as the only authoritative source of “the evidence”
- Proceduralisation of review processes very appropriate and necessary for some types of question – not others
- Scientific credibility seen to derive from displays of compliance with procedures
- Procedures can involve suppression of “the author” (critique, creativity, interpretation)
- Constructs the thing “to be known” in a limiting way

There are different types of review question

- Review questions are of different types and demand different forms of answers
- Review methods need to be matched to the type of questions
- Broadly, review methods are either *interpretive* or *aggregrative*, though most contain elements of both

Some types of questions

- Listing
- Estimating
- Establishing relationships (esp of causality)
- Finding factors implicated in relationships
- Identifying causal chains
- Identifying conditions of causality
- Creating taxonomies
- Describing and characterising
- Determining stages
- Theorising and explaining

Systematic reviews typically produce aggregative syntheses

- Focus on summarising data
- Categories under which data are to be summarised are assumed to be secure and well-specified

What can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships. Never a “thing”. (Bateson, 1978)

Bateson G (1978) Steps to an ecology of mind. New York: Ballantine

Interpretive syntheses

- Sees the generation of the concepts of the analysis as one of its tasks - category specification therefore deferred til end of process

- Examples include meta-ethnography
  - but this has thus far been used only for small sets of studies and only for qualitative studies

Why we need critical interpretive synthesis

- Situations where what is required is a theorisation of the evidence
- Encourage critique of literatures, questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about concepts and methods

Why we need critical interpretive synthesis

- Situations where what is required is a *theorisation* of the evidence
- Where critique of literatures, questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about concepts and methods is needed

Examples

- Why are rates of breast-feeding so low among the socio-economically deprived?
- Is the “inverse care law” true?

Critical Interpretive Synthesis

- Conducts critique rather than critical appraisal – treats literature as an object of inquiry
- Questions “normal science” conventions and what influences choice of proposed solutions
- Embraces all types of evidence (qual, quan, theoretical) and is attentive to procedural defects in primary studies
- Acknowledges relevance of adjacent literatures
- Explicitly oriented towards theory generation

Critical interpretive synthesis

- Start with a review topic; formulate the question more precisely after scoping stage and remain open to possibility of modification
- Document searches, but draw creatively on literatures that don't fit precise search criteria
- Formal "critical appraisal" may be necessarily for some, but not all, papers
- *Critique* is a key element of the process
- Synthesis is at the level of concepts
- Sampling and theory generation proceed concurrently

Critique of literature on access to healthcare

- “Inverse care law” is by no means proven
- Tendency to identify certain groups as likely victims of poor access
- Invoke normative assumptions about “need” relative to some apparently privileged group
- Tendency to assume lower use reflects discrimination
- Access is an emergent, not a fixed property
  - Utilisation studies very limited

CIS of access to healthcare

- Focus on how features of “the case” are orchestrated and how resources are mobilised around it
- Aspects of social and technical eligibility
- Influence of “operating conditions”

Outcomes of a CIS

- A review with fuzzy boundaries
- A mid-range theory
- Voice of “the author” is explicit and reflexively accounted for

Conclusions

- Review questions must be analysed to determine what type of answer they demand
- Method for synthesis should be matched to question
- Critical interpretive synthesis aims to put “the author” back in where appropriate

References

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