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Case studies

Working Together: How Academic Librarians Can Help Researchers Prepare for a Grey Literature Search for Systematic Reviews Involving Minoritized Populations

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ABSTRACT

As evidence synthesis methodologies, particularly systematic reviews (SRs), continue to gain popularity across social science research disciplines, faculty requests for librarian assistance with literature searches are also increasing. A critical component of a well-developed systematic review is a robust grey literature search. Grey literature provides access to research outside of traditional publishing streams, such as conference proceedings, government reports, or project reports, and thus is especially important when research involves specific populations who are historically underrepresented in empirical research, such as minoritized populations. While SRs follow well established guidelines for searching and reporting results from published literature, the same level of transparency for grey literature is frequently absent. Based on experiences from a recent SR involving a minoritized population, this article presents recommendations to facilitate discussions between librarians and researchers about preparing for the inclusion of grey literature if the SR is conducted on a minoritized population.

Statement of significance: This article provides academic librarians with an overview of the benefits and challenges of conducting a grey literature search as well as a framework to use in collaboration with faculty researchers to guide discussions about including a grey literature search in their SR. The conversation framework, informed by lessons learned, may serve as a guide for other librarians to use when assisting faculty and research groups with preparations regarding the inclusion of grey literature.

Introduction

Published systematic reviews (SRs) have expanded across many disciplines, providing an invaluable resource to researchers, practitioners, and policymakers. Due to the complexities inherent in SR research, research teams are increasingly likely to seek assistance from librarians with compiling and completing a SR. As academic librarians have professional experience navigating the databases and search engines necessary for a thorough SR, they can provide the requisite assistance to support or collaborate with a SR team. This is the case in many fields, including education, economics, and disciplines in the social sciences. Increasingly, academic librarians are assisting social

science faculty and research groups with SRs. Indeed, recommendations to involve a librarian in SRs have been made by many (Campbell et al., 2018; Ghezzi-Kopel et al., 2022; Wade et al., 2006). Where several studies across multiple disciplines show that librarian involvement in SRs improves transparency and the quality of the resulting synthesis (Koffel, 2015; Rethlefsen et al., 2015; Schellinger et al., 2021).

Yet, while SRs are not new to the social sciences, there has been little emphasis on training new librarians to support SRs in library science programs. A website scan conducted in June 2022 of programs and course syllabi across fifty American Library Association accredited Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) programs specially offering an academic librarian track demonstrated little evidence that

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SR training is included in program outcomes. The few exceptions included elective courses, such as health science librarianship. Although SR training was not apparent in MLIS programs, there are several workshops, LibGuides, and courses available for librarians in disciplines outside of medical librarianship. Most notable is the Evidence Synthesis Institute for Librarians, funded by the Institute for Library and Museum Services (IMLS). The Evidence Synthesis Institute for Librarians aims to recruit and train up to 120 library staff who support evidence syntheses in topics outside of the health sciences, and is coordinated by librarians from University of Minnesota, Cornell University, and Carnegie Mellon University (The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities et al., 2020). In addition, many academic libraries have established SR services. However, these services vary based upon librarians' skills, available resources, and administrative support (Kallaher et al., 2020; Kogut et al., 2020; Riegelman & Kocher, 2018). If academic librarians are not being trained on how to conduct SRs, then it is likely that they are not being trained on how to conduct appropriate grey literature searches in support of SRs. Therefore, the significance of including grey literature for SRs that involve minoritized populations may not be part of initial discussions.

Defining grey literature

There are numerous definitions of grey literature. Bonato's *Searching the grey literature: A handbook for searching reports, working papers, and other unpublished research* (Bonato, 2018), is arguably the definitive source on grey literature searching. It offers various yet related definitions for grey literature, illustrating the difficult nature of defining the phrase and noting that definitions are influenced by discipline and document type. As noted in the book, the definition approved at the International Conference on Grey Literature distinguishes grey literature as any document published or produced outside of commercial publishers, specifically: "That which is produced on all levels of government, academics, business and industry in print and electronic formats, but which is not controlled by commercial publishers." (p. 6) This definition includes unpublished studies as well, and studies or reports that may not be part of government or academic repositories or clearinghouses, such as greylit.org or opengrey.eu. Although not specific to SRs it provides ample examples and recommendations for considering, organizing, and conducting a grey literature search.

Including grey literature resources in a SR improves the robustness and comprehensiveness (Godin et al., 2015), reduces publication bias, and notably, assists with SRs conducted in minoritized populations (Benzies et al., 2006; Campbell et al., 2018; Paez, 2017). Many journals across disciplines favor publishing significant or positive results which in turn contributes to the "file-drawer" effect where non-significant or inconclusive literature is often not published (Conn et al., 2003; Dickersin, 1990). Subsequently, SRs that only include content published in academic journals may skew the SR results (Dickersin, 1997). Several review articles describe the impact of publication bias and have demonstrated how the inclusion of grey literature balances research findings (McAuley et al., 2000; Murray et al., 2009). Including grey literature in SRs may provide more accurate effect sizes and understandings of what research has been unsuccessful in the field (Mahood et al., 2014; McAuley et al., 2000). Despite these findings, grey literature searches are often not conducted, as including grey literature is a laborious process. When grey literature searches are conducted, the reporting is less transparent, and few reviews have reported on reproducible grey literature search processes (Chapman, 2021; Kogut et al., 2020). As a result, researchers might not be aware of the benefits that grey literature inclusion can yield in terms of their SR's comprehensiveness, quality, and transparency. As the goal of a SR is to review all pertinent published and unpublished evidence related to a specific phenomenon, librarians would benefit from learning when and how to include and conduct a grey literature search. Well established guidelines from The Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions

for conducting and reporting evidence synthesis are widely available, many of these guidelines recommend including a grey literature search as part of the SR process but lack details on when it is most critical to include (Higgins et al., 2022).

Grey literature searchers in minoritized populations

Grey literature is an essential component of a comprehensive review and can be especially beneficial for SRs involving minoritized populations. Indeed, for some research inquiries grey literature is the crux of available information. Depending on the topic of interest, geographical scope, and population, grey literature may provide more knowledge artifacts than what is available in the published literature, which may be the case for new research areas or under researched areas (Beaulieu et al., 2021; Rashid et al., 2017). Furthermore, these non-academic published resources may more accurately reflect the experiences of minoritized communities, thus serving as a bridge between real-world experiences and academic publications, or non-clinical and clinical guidelines (Hudson & Bruce-Miller, 2022).

Including key informants or expert advisory committees can provide a path for obtaining relevant grey literature while ensuring the perspectives of the community (Enticott et al., 2018; Toppenberg-Pejcic et al., 2019). Inclusion of grey literature that involves the voices of key informants allows minoritized populations to provide input on the type of grey literature reviewed ensuring that it is representative of community perspectives. Chandna et al. (2019) published a scoping review that focused on principles, practices, methods, and approaches for evaluation in Indigenous contexts. The researchers included key informants such as experts for local and national Indigenous organizations to review information, identify knowledge gaps, validate, and enrich the interpretation of findings. Inclusion of the key informants allowed the researchers to add additional grey literature, elaborate on areas where researchers should be cautious, and most importantly align with the values of the Indigenous communities. In another SR, focused on refugees and asylum seekers, the authors included an expert advisory committee of experts in the field, this group then helped expand the grey literature search to identify relevant sources of non-peer reviewed literature (Enticott et al., 2018).

Several researchers, across disciplines, have noted the value of including grey literature as these resources helped discover additional information, creating a robust and comprehensive search. For example, Powell et al. (2017) conducted a SR on impact of separation on incarcerated mothers and their children, locating 24 relevant documents in the published literature, and 51 relevant documents in grey literature sources. The authors included personal testimonies as sources of grey literature in their review which enabled the voices of the incarcerated mothers to be part of discussion, with the potential to inform practice and training. Community voices or perspectives are also essential for culturally responsive care or practice. Toppenberg-Pejcic et al. (2019) utilized grey literature to obtain perspectives related to emergency risk communication specific to recent Ebola, Zika, and yellow fever outbreaks where the authors learned that risk communications are specific and dependent on local African communities, critical information which was missing from the academic literature. Rashid et al. (2017) built upon a synthesis paper on the employment supports for adults with developmental disabilities (DD), which identified knowledge gaps related to employer perspectives. The authors followed their synthesis paper with a grey literature search article where they found nonacademic resources related to how to best support adults with DD in employment from the employer perspective, a voice that was missing from the academic literature. In each of the cases it was through the inclusion of grey literature searchers that led to the unique knowledge artifacts which helped to inform the research findings and discussions.

Grey literature conversation framework

Bearing in mind the necessity for including grey literature in synthesizing research, the intent of this paper is to provide academic librarians with a conversation framework to begin discussions about including and conducting a grey literature search when the population of interest is a minoritized group. Table 1 is descriptive, providing considerations and examples, and should not be read as prescriptive, as each SR is unique. The conversation framework may be especially helpful for librarians new to SRs and grey literature searching, as there is limited guidance on the resources and approaches on how to conduct a grey literature search for a SR in a minoritized population. The following sections will first describe our project, before walking through the recommendations referenced in Table 1 and explore the ways we applied these approaches in our work.

Our project was funded by Advancing Informal Science Learning (AISL) program funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF). From the beginning, an academic librarian was invited to participate in the development and writing of the grant, providing guidance on the academic and grey literature search inclusion and strategies. The goal of our project was to conduct a SR to synthesize the evidence of Science Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) informal learning programs for neurodiverse children and adolescents (K-12 students). The term “neurodiversity” was coined by a sociologist in 1990 to describe conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, and other neurological conditions characterized as less-typical cognitive variation (Disabled World, 2020). Our SR focused on answering the following research questions:

1. What program elements (teaching and learning variables) in informal STEM learning settings facilitate inclusion of neurodiverse K-12 STEM learners?
2. What program elements (teaching and learning variables) in informal STEM learning settings are correlated with benefits for neurodiverse K-12 STEM learners?

For more details about our proposed project please reference our protocol paper (Jenson et al., 2022).

Discuss the population

If the SR involves a minoritized population, it is necessary to inquire for specific information. This includes identifying names or labels, geography (languages), age ranges, and any other related information about the population that may be distinctly relevant to the research objectives. In our project, the PI and librarian met initially to discuss the population for the SR (neurodiverse K-12 learners), where the PI provided the librarian with a list of different conditions to assist in developing terms to search. In our project, the librarian first conducted an initial search in databases to identify the conditions included in a “neurodiverse” search. The librarian learned that the term “neurodiverse” was not always recognized by databases. After this information was presented the PI and research team, the group had further discussions about neurodiverse conditions to determine which conditions should be included in the SR. In this process we learned that while the term “neurodiverse” was an umbrella term, inclusive of many conditions, this term was not always used to describe the population of interest. Much literature was focused on specific conditions (e.g., Autism spectrum disorder) within this umbrella term. This may be the case in other SRs, if the population of interest is only recently described in academic literature or less established as an indexed term. In such cases, based on our experiences, we recommend expanding discussions about the population to additional experts in the field or community members who can serve as a key informants/spokesperson.

Table 1

Conversation framework for the preparation of grey literature in SRs involving minoritized populations.

Recommendations	Discussion Questions	How Recommendations Were Applied in Our Project
Discuss the population in detail (e.g. geography, names, dates)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the geographical area the research will include? Will this inform inclusion or exclusion criteria? • What names or labels are used to identify the population in the literature? In their community? In other forms of information? • Does the research team have a connection/key informant within the group, or recent experience working with the population? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussions of the population occurred between the PI and the librarian. Terms were identified by the PI and expanded upon by subject terms and keywords noted in the electronic databases and government websites. • PI had previous work that helped inform relevant search terms.
Determine what research is being conducted in the community of interest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What type of research is being conducted in or about this community? • After an initial literature review has been conducted, what are the gaps in the literature? • If unknown, is it possible to invite experts in the field to learn what type of research is being conducted? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Librarian conducted initial searches in databases, and the research team reviewed the literature to get an understanding of the type of literature. • Librarian researched non-profit organizations related to the population. • PI was aware of the type of research being conducted based on prior experience.
Identify with the team the resources necessary to carry out a grey literature search	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there funding opportunities to apply for? • Can I budget for a librarian to work on the project? • Do I have a team to assist in the work of this project? Do I have team members with experience in conducting a SR? • What is the timeline of the project? • How will grey literature be collected and organized? • What limitations exist in terms of access? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PI applied for a federal grant to carry out this work, which supported PI, a project director, social sciences librarian, and a research assistant. • Research team had discussions of needing to include a grey literature search. • Project timeline was adjusted to incorporate grey literature search.
Explore the involvement of community members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can we contact community experts for assistance with grey literature search? • What type of grey literature is being done? • What terms are community members using to describe their population? • Where is the community publishing or disseminating knowledge? • What type of grey literature sources are there? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PI and some members of the research team conducted initial research in the population to discuss appropriate terms to describe the community. • Research team reached out to researchers who were obtaining funding for projects related to the same population and similar topic of interests for grey literature artifacts. • Research team reviewed all materials that were sent to see if it met inclusion criteria.

Determine what research is being conducted in the community of interest

An additional conversation should occur about what type of research is being conducted on the population of interest for the SR. This is particularly important for research being conducted on minoritized populations because this will likely inform the decision to include a grey literature search in the SR. Minoritized populations are groups of individuals that experience social and political challenges as their identity is associated with a particular group that is undervalued in comparison to social groups with greater political power. Examples of minoritized populations might include but are not limited to, individuals who identify with a particular racial/ethnic group; gender; disability status; LGBTQIA status or individuals who live in a specific region (Institute of Medicine of the National Academies & Board on the Health of Select Populations, 2011; Korngiebel et al., 2015; Krahn et al., 2015).

A variety of study types and research designs are implemented in minoritized populations. For example, in some minoritized populations randomized control trials (RCTS) are not conducted because there are cultural values inherent in the population which concern equal treatment of all individuals (Etz & Arroyo, 2015). Instead, community based participatory research (CBPR) may likely be utilized in minoritized populations. In our project, the PI expected more qualitative than quantitative research designs in this population relevant to the research questions. Group conversations ensured the need for including grey literature, in which the librarian was asked to start searching relevant organizations (e.g., NSF awardees) related to the population. These recommendations were based on prior knowledge from the PI. When librarians conduct an initial review of relevant search terms related to population, we recommend reviewing some of the literature initially as this initial review may provide rationale and budget justification for allocating resources to conduct a grey literature search (e.g., there are gaps in the academic literature).

Identify resources to carry out a grey literature search

Grey literature searching is time consuming, and many resources require customized and distinct search strategies. These strategies must also produce results, if any, and be replicable. Conveying time constraints to the research teams will help identify which resources can and should be included. These conversations should happen in the earliest of planning conversations, so that the objectives of the SR are not compromised later. During these early conversations, it may be helpful to share how other successful SRs were arranged and describe the types of resources often needed (e.g., student research assistants to review articles; project manager; citation managers; and screening tools) to conduct a successful SR. If the researcher is conducting a SR focused on a minoritized population, then additional conversations between researcher and librarian may need to take place to discuss how the SR will ensure that the grey literature search will occur.

As described above, our project was funded in 2021. The research team began to conduct the grey literature search in 2022 and adjusted the project timeline to allow for a comprehensive grey literature search. If the SR is conducted on a hard-to-reach population, we recommend planning for a grey literature search and including appropriate resources and time commitments to do so. During the review of grey literature our team learned the number of artifacts to review was greater than the academic literature, and because grey literature is produced in a variety of formats, reviewing the information often took much longer than reviewing published academic literature. That being the case, it is necessary to ensure appropriate resources to conduct a grey literature search early on in the planning process.

Explore the involvement of community members

Many researchers, if conducting a SR on a minoritized or hard to reach population, have experience working with the population.

Involving experts on a topic, or a key informant that is part of the community, can assist a grey literature search expanding and enriching access to information (Chandna et al., 2019). Often these community experts will have historic knowledge and are aware of research projects or community activities that may be relevant.

Community experts may also assist in the production of keywords, search terms, and phrases which align with the linguistic and social traits in a given population. These labels may vary across researchers, local projects, and peer-reviewed publications. Academics often create terms that aim at describing communities; however, the community members may not resonate or use these terms. As a specific example, a national survey of Latinos conducted by Pew Research in 2020 indicated that 25 % of U.S. Hispanics have heard of the term *Latinx* but just 3 % use this term (Noe-Bustamante et al., 2020). The librarian must be aware of these nuances to find terms that community members use when describing the same phenomenon to ensure a robust grey literature search.

Community experts may also know where to look for relevant grey literature. Many populations may be more likely to publish works in publication formats that disseminate directly to the community before peer-reviewed publications. For example, in American Indian communities, local communication methods (e.g., local newspaper or local radio station) are often trusted and used for disseminating important knowledge to the community (Daley & Dietz, 2020). Academics may consider using trusted sources of information (e.g., government sites) to obtain grey literature, however community experts may provide input on if that source of information is relevant to their community. Therefore, community experts again might have valuable insight on whether or not a potential grey literature source is relevant to the community of interest.

Researchers that extensively work in minoritized communities can be considered experts in academia; however, these individuals should not be considered community experts unless they belong to the group. In our case, a previous research project informed the selection of terms for the project (Jenson, 2020). In this project, ten neurodiverse undergraduate students were interviewed about their experiences in STEM programs as neurodiverse students. Research teams should be considerate of including community perspectives in a manner that aligns with the research questions, time, and resources of the project.

Conclusion

The increase of SRs conducted in various disciplines is likely to continue. This paper suggests that grey literature searches are important to conducting a well-developed SR particularly when research involves minoritized populations, disadvantaged populations, or populations that are under researched or difficult to access. We provide a conversation framework that aims to assist discussions between librarians and researchers about considerations for grey literature searches for SR conducted on minoritized populations to ensure a thorough review within the resources and constraints that exist. Within this framework are examples of how this project team incorporated these recommendations into a grey literature search focused on a minoritized population. We encourage additional research and others to build upon our recommendations for the consideration and preparation of grey literature searches in SRs that involve minoritized populations.

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