Background
Systematic reviews of social research can entail the storage, classification and analysis of large quantities of electronic data and the management of these data across many reviewers working in different sites. This presents many challenges to the management of the review because, unless effective systems are developed to manage these data, reviews may become ‘unsystematic’ by losing studies or failing to track which studies originated from which search and the reasons for their inclusion/exclusion. The growth in the internet has made it easier for people to collaborate on projects without necessarily working in the same place. However, few software tools support distributed working throughout the life cycle of the review.

One solution to this problem is presented here. It depicts some of the major information management challenges in reviews and shows how a bespoke software application, EPPI-Reviewer, assists in each stage of the review.

References are allocated for screening and then screened by reviewers

Citations can be screened on titles and abstracts by one or more people. If references are being ‘double-screened’, kappa statistics are available to measure inter-reviewer reliability.

Sometimes, many tens of thousands of references are screened for inclusion in a review. If these references are stored in one place, together with decisions on their inclusion in the review, the chances of losing important references are reduced.

The full papers of relevant studies are obtained and screened for inclusion

Again, following the principle that nothing should be lost to the review, software can aid the process of retrieving full papers by, for example, keeping track of which papers still need to be retrieved, which are on order and which are available in specified libraries.

The results of the studies are synthesised

Inclusion criteria and exclusion criteria are developed. Systematic reviewers could both contribute to, and benefit from, this activity – something which requires the development of appropriate systems for duplicates. EPPI-Reviewer can import citations from the major health and social science databases. Filters for new databases are added when required.

The database of studies becomes part of the dissemination process

Because all health promotion reviews at the EPPI-Centre have used the same tool for more than 10 years, we have developed a database of studies with detailed and consistently applied codes which can be made available online as a resource to others working in the field. This shows the benefits of the generic data extraction tool in action.

This poster illustrates the benefits of a system containing consistently coded data across a series of reviews. The studies from more than 90 systematic reviews are stored on the database, the majority classified with one of three classification systems. This supports the identification of studies for future reviews and is a resource which offers users far more information about the research it contains than a database containing only basic bibliographic information.

Current thinking in e-social science suggests that an important area for future work involves the standardised ‘tagging’ of online information. Systematic reviewers could both contribute to, and benefit from, this activity – something which requires the development of appropriate systems for new databases. Filters for new databases are added when required.

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A major issue in systematic reviews is keeping track of all citations. A permanent search log helps reviewers to organise their citations and report the results of searches accurately at the end of the review.

Citations are downloaded from databases (e.g. ERIC)