3 – Search Terms

When you have a topic it can sometimes help to put it into a question. Thinking of it as a question you would like the literature to answer. For example in this box below you might go for something like “What is the experience of adolescents with a history of disruptive behaviour undergoing a course of mindfulness training?”.

When you have that kind of question you can easily pick out your concepts which it is important for a paper to include for it to be one you would consider using in your review. In this example, you want there to be some mention of experience, and you want that experience to be of the right population so they have to be of the right age group for you, which would be adolescents in this case. You want there to be some history of disruptive behaviour and the intervention, you want that to be mindfulness in some way.

When you’ve identified those concepts it is useful then to think about synonyms so how might other researchers, perhaps in different countries or in different times, refer to these particular topics.

So for adolescents, whether it’s in time or space, there is going to be other ways of talking about that group. They may be referred to as teenagers or perhaps young people or young persons or even youths or juveniles sometimes. If your end, or cut off, age for adolescents is maybe up into the mid or early to mid twenties, perhaps young adults might even be appropriate. So you want to have a think about the different ways that particular group or concept might be referred to in the literature.

Similarly for disruptive behaviour what you may want to think about here is more specific types of disruptive behaviour. Researchers may look at perhaps one type of disruptive behaviour only and not mention the umbrella term disruptive behaviour. So you may not want to miss out on research that has been done on aggression or on violence. You would want to have those sorts of more specific terms in your head, or as ideas of search terms, to capture similar, and just as useful research, as anything mentioning disruptive behaviour would be to you.

Similarly for mindfulness, but perhaps in a broader sense or in a slightly off to the side way: mindfulness might be the only thing you want to read about so that would great but sometimes it helps to have an a idea, as I think we’ve mentioned before, to broaden out a search as well. So just as aggression or violence may be acceptable for you to read about as well as disruptive behaviour, might it be useful for papers mentioning meditation, may they be useful in the same was as papers talking about mindfulness. This kind of thinking is helpful for when there is not enough on the particular question you’ve come up with. It helps to have an idea, as we’ve said before, of which concept you don’t mind loosening up or broadening out on. So is it the experience of the adolescents or is it the actual training they were going through that was most important?
The training word itself, if it is important to include that, then you’d obviously not want to miss out on any of the other ways that could be referred to, be it education, programmes or courses or anything like that.

Then for the word experience, for that kind of concept, there’s quite a lot done on attitudes for example so that might be a term you want to include and also people might look at satisfaction rates, or dissatisfaction rates, so those sorts of experiences or feelings about a training course is useful to include as well. May there be proxy terms or proxy measures which tell you about the same thing? If researchers have looked at compliance rates of disruptive adolescents on a mindfulness training course or the dropout rates, does that tell you the kind of thing you want to know about? It maybe doesn’t but it’s maybe worth having a think about that, or noting it down somewhere, as being options to broaden out a search if that’s necessary.

So lots of synonyms is helpful for a search.

The other thing it is useful to think about and which is indicated here by the words which have brackets around their endings, particularly behav(iour) and program(mes), is that sometimes there are just straight differences in spelling between North American and British English. It’s definitely worth remembering or noting where that happens. So for behaviour obviously “…our” here but just “…or” in US spelling. Similarly for programme, “…mme” at the end of it for us but just the single “…m” if it is US English which is being used.

The other common variation is perhaps double L, for counselling here but a single L in North American spelling and any of the Greek/Latin vowel combinations, so paediatric (paed) here for us but just ped… if its North American spelling of English which is being used. Definitely think about and note your words which may be spelled differently in English.

The other reasons I’ve got brackets around the ends of lots of words in the table is that words which have different endings may all be equally useful to you.

It’s worth remembering that perhaps you don’t mind if the adolescent is referred to in the singular or the plural. Or is it just adolescence that is referred to? Is it teen, teenager, teenagers or teens? Are the young persons singular or plural?

For the disruptive behaviour, the brackets at the ending of behaviour are for the North American and British English spellings, but for aggression or violence do you care if the behaviour has been referred to as aggressive rather than being referred to as aggression? Similarly for violent or violence?

For mindfulness might it be mindfully or mindful or is always mindfulness?

Certainly, definitely, think about any difference just where it is just straight singular or plural. But for any word which might have a number of different endings and you don’t care which of those endings, those variant word endings that you find, they are all equally useful to you, note them down because there is a symbol called a
“truncation symbol” which databases will let you use and it stands for zero or any number of characters. So rather than having to type out all the different words with their different endings you can take it back to a sensible root or trunk, put on this truncation symbol, often an asterisk (*), to stand for all the differences and then you don’t have to worry about those differences and missing out on words with different endings.

So, certainly, when you have a topic, I think it can be helpful to put it into a question you want the literature to answer. Identify what are the main concepts within that question that you’ve got, within your research question. Think about synonyms for those concepts, different ways those particular concepts may be talked about. Look at any differences in straight North American and British English spellings and also think of words with multiple endings and how you might account for those efficiently in a database search.