8 – Subject headings – used in a keyword search

This sort of search, this searching just in the subject heading field isn’t what you have to do and probably is not what you would choose to do for your systematic review.

The subject heading information is really useful for getting synonyms on a particular concept, so to add to the keywords, to add to your search terms, that will find the right kind of articles for on concept you are interested in reading about they are particularly good prompts for any terms which may differ between here and the USA. You would definitely want to use terminology from both places and because most of these databases are produced in the USA that’s the terminology they would use. The subject headings prompt for that. They would remind you of that.

Reasons not to use a subject heading search though, are that not every record has a subject heading field. The most recently added records of a database will have information directly from the journal article, so the title, author, abstract, author keywords. Then at a later date, after someone has read the article, the “added value” information gets added to the rec so they are “psycINFO-ed” or “MEDLINE-d” or “EMBASE-d” if you like. The subject headings are included in that added value information.

So if you are searching for phrases or words in a subject heading field and if there is no subject heading field on a record, that record cannot be returned in a set of results.

Also each database is aimed at a slightly different audience and the classification thesauri they use will be different. Some subject headings will be exactly the same but psycINFO you would expect to talk better, or in a better way, about psychology and psychiatry topics just as perhaps physical medicine is talked about differently, more specifically, in the thesaurus MEDLINE has.

Unless you know that your subject heading is the same in all three databases, should you be choosing to search three databases at once, you don’t really know what a search in subject heading field is doing, so it wouldn’t be systematic.

Searching as we’ve just done, in just the subject heading field, misses out on the most recently added records and if you’re searching more than one database at once you would have to know that subject heading was the same all of the databases you’ve chosen.

What you would normally do though, I think, for your systematic review, would be to check the subject headings to see what ideas you can get from them, on what terminology, what search terms to use and then to remove the tick from beside that “Map term to subject heading” option underneath the search box and just do a “normal search”.

A normal search is what is labelled a “Keyword” search and that will look in the abstract, in the title, in the author keywords and other keyword fields but that will
include the subject heading field. Therefore, you wouldn’t be missing out by taking the Map term to subject heading tick off, but you would usually be getting more results even if you use exactly the subject heading phrase/word you’ve found. You’d be searching in the subject heading field, so get the records where that particular phrase is used there, but also get the records where that phrase was perhaps only used in the abstract.

For your own searches you will probably take the Map term to subject heading tick off but looking at the subject headings first gives you an idea, hopefully, of extra search terms to use that will work well for your particular concepts.