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COMMENTARY

Scoping reviews and their role in identifying research priorities

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Abstract

Background and Objectives: Scoping reviews have been identified as appropriate methodologies to contribute to our knowledge. The objective of this review is to summarize how scoping reviews can be used to identify research priorities.

Methods: Based on our experience as evidence synthesis methodologists and researchers, the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) scoping review methodology group, have identified the potential roles of scoping reviews in identification of research priorities.

Results: Scoping reviews typically ask broad questions that allow researchers to obtain an overview or map of the existing evidence. Scoping reviews also incorporate multiple levels of evidence that enriches the strength of the knowledge that is gained. This value is revealed by the use of scoping reviews to contribute to and perform the following functions: 1) map a research area and identify gaps that need to be addressed; 2) prioritize research topics by identifying key issues to investigate; 3) identify the type of study designs that have been used to investigate a particular topic, and/or the range of outcomes measured following a specific intervention; 4) identify the essential contextual factors that are relevant to the study of a particular research topic; 5) identify equity issues in the research field; 6) assist in engaging stakeholders and/or experts in the field by facilitating the inclusion of these stakeholders within the research process; and 7) provide the relevant new knowledge to enhance and support applications for funding.

Conclusion: To ensure this contribution to identifying research priorities is reliable, scoping reviews must be performed following the existing rigorous methodological processes and adhere to the currently available reporting guidelines. By doing so, scoping reviews have great potential to identify research priorities, to guide the expansion of research and the generation of new knowledge. © 2025 The Author(s). Published by Elsevier Inc. This is an open access article under the CC BY license (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

Keywords: Scoping review; Research prioritization; Methodological process; Knowledge synthesis; Evidence synthesis; Research priorities

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What is new?

Key findings
- Scoping reviews are used to ask broad questions and are used to obtain an overview or map the existing evidence; however, their role in identifying research priorities has been unclear.

- These include: 1) mapping a research area and identifying gaps, 2) prioritization of topics, 3) identification of study designs, quality, and outcome measures, 4) identification of contextual factors relevant to the research area, 5) identification of equity issues, 6) engaging with stakeholders including experts in the field, and 7) advocating for funding.

What this adds to what is known?
- We propose that scoping reviews can play an important role as a form of evidence synthesis to prioritize research priorities. We identified seven areas in which scoping reviews can be used to identify research priorities. These are: 1) mapping a research area and identifying gaps; 2) prioritization of topics; 3) identification of study designs, quality, and outcome measures; 4) identification of contextual factors relevant to the research area; 5) identification of equity issues; 6) engaging with stakeholders including experts in the field; and 7) advocating for funding.

What is the implication and what should change now?
- Research prioritization is an important aspect for policymakers and funding bodies holders to efficiently allocate resources strategically, address societal needs, align with strategic goals, promote innovation, inform evidence-based decision-making, engage stakeholders, and optimize resource allocation in healthcare and research.

- Scoping reviews prevent redundant studies and guide research toward areas needing further investigation by clarifying key concepts, ensuring consistent terminology, and informing policy and practice with comprehensive overviews.

1. Background

Setting research priorities is crucial for a number of reasons, including resource allocation, avoiding duplication, addressing urgent issues, enabling evidence-based decision-making, and enhancing research impact. Research budgets are often limited, and to be financially viable,

organizations need to allocate resources efficiently. Research prioritization methods help in identifying areas where research can have the most impact. Therefore, by focusing on high-priority topics, limited resources can be directed toward research that is more likely to yield valuable results. Additionally, by identifying research priorities, avoiding duplication, and ultimately reducing research waste, is also possible [1,2].

Research prioritization methods can help in rapidly identifying and addressing urgent research questions to find solutions and inform policy decisions. Moreover, policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders rely on research to make informed decisions. Identifying research priorities helps ensure that research addresses the most relevant and pressing issues, thus providing a stronger evidence base for decision-making [3].

Research that aligns with priorities is more likely to have real-world impact. When research addresses issues that are considered important by stakeholders, it is more likely to be adopted and applied in practice, leading to positive changes in the field. This also enables a strategic approach to research [4]. It ensures that the research community focuses on questions that have the potential to yield the greatest scientific and societal benefit. Establishing clear and transparent methods for research priority setting increases accountability. Stakeholders can track progress in addressing identified priorities, and organizations can demonstrate that their research agenda is driven by evidence and stakeholder input.

Evidence-based priority setting means that research can be directed toward identifiable priorities rather than randomly directed or impelled by other forces that might not lead to the most efficient use of time and resources. In the UK, the James Lind Alliance has guidance on conducting priority-setting partnerships and how literature can be searched to provide evidence of uncertainty. This can include both published and unpublished sources from systematic reviews and guidelines to websites and social media [5].

Scoping reviews are often conducted when a topic is broad or complex, and researchers need to identify the key concepts, sources, and gaps in the literature undertaking the in-depth analysis typically performed in a systematic review [6−9]. There is a need to develop a greater understanding of the potential use of scoping reviews in the identification of research priorities. In this article, we discuss how scoping reviews can be a valuable tool for identifying research priorities, particularly when there is a need to gain a broad understanding of the existing literature and research landscape in a particular field.

2. Method

Based on our experience as evidence synthesis methodologists and researchers, the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI)

scoping review methodology group along with other researchers, have identified the potential roles of scoping reviews in identification of research priorities.

3. Results

3.1. Mapping a research area and identifying gaps

Scoping reviews fulfill a critical role in mapping and identifying the types of available evidence and identifying gaps within specific topics or fields. This approach offers a broad view of existing research and can contribute to identifying and setting research priorities [10]. Essentially, by knowing what existing research has uncovered, gaps in knowledge can be identified and assessed in terms of their importance for further research.

Scoping reviews serve as a powerful tool for systematically mapping the diverse types of research completed to date in a specific area. This encompasses the identification of key concepts, sources, and the types of evidence available. By using a visual representation of these areas through tables, maps, or other chart types, assessing priorities can be easily identified to the audience.

The inclusive nature of scoping reviews allows for the incorporation of various study designs, methodologies, and sources. By conducting these reviews, researchers gain a comprehensive understanding of the existing evidence landscape, contributing to the broader goal of evidence synthesis, which is invaluable for researchers seeking to navigate the existing literature and make informed decisions [6–9].

By recognizing well-explored areas and understanding the nuances of the existing evidence, research gaps can be identified, laying the foundation for informed research priority-setting. Sometimes they lead to subsequent systematic reviews. Although scoping reviews may not explicitly identify a full systematic review as the next step, they provide a comprehensive overview that can guide researchers toward potential questions or topics for further investigation. This nuanced approach allows for flexibility in research planning and decision-making.

3.2. Prioritization of topics

Scoping reviews are increasingly used to identify and describe approaches to help prioritize primary research topics in health-related areas. An example of this is detailed by Fadlallah et al, 2021, where a scoping review methodology was used to create a framework of research [3]. Fadlallah et al, 2021 identified a total of 28 prioritization criteria, which were further categorized into nine domains: (1) problem-related considerations; (2) practice considerations; (3) existing research base; (4) amenability to research; (5) urgency; (6) interest of the topic at different levels; (7) implementation considerations; (8) expected impact of applying evidence; and (9) ethical, human rights, and moral

consideration [11]. The authors were then able to streamline their work based on the categorization process.

Another example where scoping reviews were used for research prioritization is by Crilly et al, 2022, where studies were published on the topic of health care provided in the emergency department to provide a comprehensive overview of published emergency care [12]. A total of 14 themes for emergency care research were considered within three overarching research domains: emergency populations, emergency care workforce and processes, and emergency care clinical areas [12]. In this way, scoping reviews can form a basis for further discussion and analysis for stakeholders wishing to develop a hierarchy of priorities for subsequent research while identifying areas that are less critical to investigate further. The results can then be put through a consensus or agreement building process (e.g., Delphi) or a James Lind Alliance Priority Setting Partnership initiative [5].

3.3. Identification of study designs, quality, and outcome measures

To inform the process of research prioritization, scoping reviews can map the current evidence base to identify the type of study designs that have been reported on a topic. In health care, this can include published study designs such as systematic reviews, quantitative research, qualitative research, and mixed methods studies, as well as unpublished literature such as reports, doctoral theses, protocols, preprints, and studies posted on websites. Clear gaps in study design can then be noted for future research recommendations and prioritization as well as identification of studies with similar designs that can be synthesized in a systematic review to inform subsequent guideline development [13].

Within this method, health domains and related outcome measures can also be mapped in a topic area via a scoping review to inform priority-setting groups and researchers of what has been reported and where the domain and outcome gaps are in the evidence base [14]. Integration of this evidence alongside any established core outcome sets can be helpful to guide priority-setting groups. An example of this is a scoping review by Khalil et al, 2020, where the authors have mapped palliative care research undertaken in Australia over a period of time [15]. The authors mapped their results by study design, populations, and outcome measures used [15]. Another example is a large scoping review on gender equity in academic health research [16]. It was found that 2996 different outcomes were reported, and a call for standardized core outcome sets was made in this area.

While scoping reviews do not typically undertake methodological quality assessment as they are more aligned to providing a comprehensive picture of a body of literature irrespective of quality or biases, this step can be included in a scoping review where the aim of the review is to report

on the relative quality and nature of the studies within a particular field in order to map how research has been undertaken and reported [7–9]. These kinds of scoping reviews can be useful in underpinning decision-making and planning for future research in priority areas by revealing where past shortcomings can be addressed and improved thereby enabling better quality-focused research on priority topics.

3.4. Identification of contextual factors relevant to research area

Scoping reviews can provide a holistic view of contextual factors associated with interventions or health issues. This increased understanding becomes a crucial precursor to informed decision-making, guiding researchers and stakeholders toward more nuanced and effective strategies. For example, a scoping review conducted by Al-Azzawi et al, 2021 identified seven types of contextual factors related to general practitioner's decision-making on antibiotic prescribing, including space and place, time, stress and emotion, patient characteristics, therapeutic relationship, decision-making and practice style negotiation, uncertainty management, and clinical experience [17]. They also found that the contextual factors were pervasive throughout the consultation process, playing a crucial role in management decisions, and frequently influencing prescribing practices [17].

Scoping reviews can also serve as catalysts for hypothesis generation by identifying contextual factors relevant to a research area. The synthesis of diverse evidence allows researchers to draw connections, identify patterns, and generate hypotheses that can be further explored in subsequent research endeavors. This process of hypothesis generation is pivotal in advancing scientific inquiry and shaping the trajectory of future research priorities.

Priority setting for integrated health and social care in Scotland was undertaken through a scoping review and multidisciplinary collaboration. The scoping review identified key principles and approaches to priority setting from disciplines such as economics, decision analysis, ethics, and law. These insights were combined with input from a multidisciplinary workshop involving local and national stakeholders and academics to coproduce a priority-setting framework. The resulting framework incorporates principles like opportunity cost, justice, and fair procedures and outlines stages such as framing questions, evaluating resources, and involving patients and staff. This structured approach supports equitable resource allocation and shifts resources from acute to community services [18].

Another example demonstrating this issue is published by Simona et al, 2022 [19]. The authors examined maternal healthcare utilization in sub-Saharan Africa, focusing on contextual influences such as education, poverty, media exposure, autonomy, empowerment, and access to health facilities. By analyzing 34 studies, the review underscores the critical role of societal and community-level factors in shaping maternal health outcomes. Scoping reviews help pinpoint these broader determinants, highlighting areas like social conditions and gender norms that, when addressed, can improve maternal healthcare uptake and reduce mortality [19].

3.5. Identification of equity issues

Scoping reviews can contribute important insights related to health equity within research priority setting, including setting priorities for when and how to update existing systematic reviews [20]. In many fields, there is increasing realization that the existing evidence may lack attention to the social determinants of health and may be missing a focus upon, or the perspectives of, key population groups and/or contexts. Scoping reviews can be used to characterize the existing evidence from an equity lens, thereby identifying key gaps related to health equity and helping to inform future equity-focused priority setting [20]. This is in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), emphasizing equity as a foundational principle, recognizing that sustainable development cannot be achieved without addressing inequalities [21].

Equity-focused scoping reviews can be undertaken to explore equity-related findings (or reporting) across systematic reviews and/or primary studies. Use of frameworks for health equity analyses in systematic reviews such as PROGRESS-Plus (indicators of social disadvantage place of residence, race/ethnicity, occupation, gender, religion, education, social capital, socioeconomic status, plus age, disability and sexual orientation) can assist with conceptualizing relevant equity dimensions and with data extraction, coding, and mapping the evidence base [22]. As an example, a scoping review explored health equity characteristics of primary research on the unmet community mobility needs of older adults, highlighting an underrepresentation of studies considering rural settings and studies originating in the lower and middle-income countries (among other issues) [23].

In another example, a team undertook a scoping review to consider diversity and inclusion in rheumatology research. Out of 42 included randomized controlled trials, the scoping review found that most trial participants were middle-aged, female, and White and that less than one-third of trials reported on characteristics such as race, education, socioeconomic status, or occupation [24]. In another example, a scoping review of systematic reviews was recently undertaken to understand inequities in digital health technology in the World Health Organization (WHO) Europe region. The scoping review found that out of 22 included systematic reviews, none had explored differences in access to digital health care by age, gender, sex, occupation, education, homelessness, or substance misuse. The review concluded that there were multiple gaps in evidence across different equity domains [25].

We suggest that utilization of a common framework (eg, PROGRESS-Plus) will support research prioritization efforts by allowing for analysis and a comparison across and within topic areas [22]. However, given that equity-related data are frequently missing or poorly reported in primary studies (and systematic reviews), it can be challenging to develop a consistent approach to equity-related analyses within scoping reviews (as is also the case for systematic reviews) [22]. We suggest that more research is needed to develop further guidance in this area. Knowledge users can play a key role in helping to fill equity-related gaps in the evidence base.

3.6. Engaging with stakeholders including experts in the field

Stakeholder and topic expert engagement in the research priority-setting process can include any activity to identify, prioritize, and reach consensus in the area, topic, or research question(s) that need to be addressed. Different definitions of stakeholders have been proposed in the literature. For this article, we define a stakeholder as someone that can or will be impacted by the planning, execution, results, or communication of a scoping review [26]. The JBI scoping review methodology includes an optional stakeholders' consultation in all the steps of the scoping review [26].

Engagement and involvement of stakeholders have been mapped across 731 projects reflecting areas such as agriculture, environment, health, social work, and technology and identified the complexity of stakeholder involvement [4]. In adopting a scoping review as the first step in a priority-setting process, all stakeholders can be identified and included with recent guidance to support this. Additionally, initial stages of the priority-setting process using a scoping review can also map who and how stakeholders were involved and engaged in primary research and evidence syntheses that inform the priority-setting process [26].

Eleven approaches described stakeholder recruitment methods, and these ranged from announcement in journal and newspapers, on website, by letter and distribution of brochures; to use of emails and established contacts; mapping stakeholders; checklist for the identification of stakeholders; and organizational, and personal contacts. Additional methods to recruit representatives of patients and the public included social media (X, Facebook), radio ads, and leveraging existing community-based partnerships. Stakeholders were engaged both via online platforms (e.g., online surveys, email discussions, teleconference) and in-person (e.g., workshops, smaller meetings) [3].

3.7. Advocating for funding

Scoping reviews can be influential methodologies for advocating for research funding by identifying knowledge gaps, mapping the literature landscape, identifying priority areas, demonstrating research impact, engaging stakeholders, and informing research prioritization efforts. By providing a comprehensive overview of existing evidence and highlighting the need for further research, scoping reviews can help make a compelling case for the importance of investing in research in a particular area. This can help demonstrate to potential funding bodies the relevance of future studies based on a thorough review of existing evidence and identified gaps.

Research organizations often prioritize scientific merit and feasibility when evaluating funding proposals but rarely consider their value for money due to the challenges of integrating such assessments. Tuffaha et al, 2019 proposed a practical framework to incorporate both merit and value-for-money considerations into health research funding decisions [27]. The framework includes four steps: screening applications for eligibility, assessing the merit of proposals, estimating the expected value of research for shortlisted proposals, and ranking them based on return on investment to guide funding decisions. By applying analytical methods to estimate expected returns using data from real-world grant applications, the framework demonstrates how value-for-money assessments can be effectively integrated into existing processes. This approach aims to enhance the efficient allocation of research budgets and maximize the impact of research investments. Moreover, it aligns very closely with reducing research waste, as indicated by Chalmers et al, 2014 [28].

4. Discussion

Scoping reviews are increasingly being used for research prioritization. We have highlighted the benefit of using scoping reviews in identifying several aspects of research prioritization including mapping research gaps, prioritization of topics, identification of study designs and outcome measures, identification of contextual factors, equity issues, engaging with stakeholders, and advocating for funding.

Research prioritization is an important aspect for policymakers and funding bodies holders to efficiently allocate resources strategically, address societal needs, align with strategic goals, promote innovation, inform evidence-based decision-making, engage stakeholders, and optimize resource allocation in health care and research. Our previous work on the importance of scoping reviews in reducing research waste highlighted their value in mapping published research to identify areas of saturation and gaps, streamlining future research efforts to address unexplored areas [2]. Scoping reviews prevent redundant studies and guide research toward areas needing further investigation by clarifying key concepts, ensuring consistent terminology, and informing policy and practice with comprehensive overviews. This avoids ineffective interventions by basing decisions on the best available evidence. Furthermore, scoping reviews set research priorities by identifying pressing and underexplored areas, guiding funding agencies and researchers to allocate resources efficiently. They also facilitate knowledge

translation by summarizing and disseminating existing knowledge in accessible formats and often serve as a precursor to systematic reviews, refining research questions and inclusion criteria. This current commentary, however, focuses on using scoping reviews to prioritize research areas, emphasizing their strategic role in directing efforts and resources where they are most needed.

The WHO recently published a framework for research prioritization methodologies to use by their staff. They highlighted the importance of reviewing what has already been done before in a systematic way; however, in many cases due to their specificity, systematic reviews are unlikely to be an appropriate evidence synthesis method for priority setting [29]. Specific questions for the review could include data on current health strategies of national and international research agencies and data on which stakeholders are already most engaged in this area. Moreover, information on the current resource flows toward particular research areas and any funding gaps. Mapping evaluations or implementation research studies that may challenge accepted practice may also be useful. Scoping reviews have the potential to address all these research questions [27].

To ensure that scoping reviews are beneficial in addressing research prioritization they must be of high quality and rigorously conducted and reported. To enhance this, they should be undertaken using a transparent methodology such as the JBI methodology based on a protocol either published or registered with Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/). Authors are also encouraged to use the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (PRISMA-ScR) reporting guidelines to ensure transparency and consistency of reporting [30].

In conclusion, scoping reviews are a very useful tool with great potential for the identification of research prioritization as they have the capacity to map evidence related to any topic and include gaps, information on study designs, outcome measures, stakeholders, context, special populations, and other aspects that may impact research prioritization. Because scoping reviews can be underpinned by robust methodological guidance and reporting guidelines, they are potentially authoritative sources of evidence to enable evidence-based research priority setting.

Declaration of generative AI and AI-assisted technologies in the writing process

No generative AI was used to write this manuscript.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

H. Khalil: Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation,

Conceptualization. **R. Jia:** Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft. **E.B. Moraes:** Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft. **Z. Munn:** Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft. **L. Alexander:** Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft. **M.D.J. Peters:** Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft. **A. Asran:** Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft. **C.M. Godfrey:** Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft. **A.C. Tricco:** Writing − review & editing. **D. Pollock:** Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft. **C. Evans:** Writing − review & editing, Writing − original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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