

SIMULATING EPIDEMICS: THE PERFORMATIVITY OF SYSTEMATIC REVIEW METHODS

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Background:

Not all evidence is created equal. Systematic reviews of the prevalence of hepatitis C-related outcomes have proliferated in recent years. This method is underpinned by the assumption that outputs of meta-analyses are objective descriptions of epidemiological reality. We seek to interrogate this account.

Approach:

Taking systematic reviews of hepatitis C indicators among people who inject drugs as case examples, and tracing their translations into policy and advocacy, our analysis draws on theoretical approaches in science and technology studies to examine the performativity of method. We focus on how enumerated entities are produced and circulate, to consider the hyperreal effects of systematic review methods.

Analysis:

Systematic reviews re-present the findings of primary studies, materializing a new enumerated entity: the pooled prevalence estimate. This estimate is stripped of the multiple contexts shaping the findings it has absorbed, including when and where data were generated, and characteristics of the sample that influenced the measured indicator. Although purporting to describe the epidemic, the pooled prevalence estimate does not reflect the epidemiological reality of any specific 'real-world' setting. Through repetition in presentations, reports, and peer-reviewed literature, the pooled prevalence estimate becomes *more real* than and supplants first-order estimates as it is put to work as evidence to inform policy, advocacy, and service provision. In becoming the primary referent for a given epidemiological quantity, the pooled prevalence estimate is made hyperreal: a simulation of reality.

Conclusion:

Pooled prevalence estimates are not neutral descriptions of epidemiological reality but performative actors that actively shape understanding of epidemics. Hyperreal estimates hold epistemic authority. This accomplishment is central to the persuasive power of systematic reviews and has implications for how such evidence can meaningfully inform action. Recognising this does not require abandoning systematic reviews, but calls for greater reflexivity about how pooled prevalence estimates are produced and used.

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SL and KL report no conflicts of interest.