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Addressing antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms in evidence syntheses and systematic searches

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This project was inspired by the experiences of our Informationists and #medlibs Twitter discussions around the development and reporting of systematic search strategies. The suggested wording provided is intended to be a template only, and should be adapted as appropriate for a given topic or project.

Rationale & suggested processes for including antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms in systematic searches

Some searches, due to the nature of their topics, must include antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and offensive terms in order to identify all published literature on that topic. This is particularly true of searches supporting evidence syntheses, where a robust and sensitive search is critical to the validity of the review. While many individuals and groups are invested in the critically important work of changing indexing practices and terms across disciplines, systematic searches must still include the language used in the published literature throughout the years and in different research communities. Reviewers, editors, and readers may question the inclusion of these terms, especially exclusionary and offensive terms, because of their potential to cause harm and trauma.

Below are suggestions for addressing antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms in evidence syntheses and systematic searches, along with suggested wording for the manuscript and supplemental materials. Authors and search developers are encouraged to use the suggested wording as a starting point, and adapt it as appropriate.

- Search developers should thoughtfully consider the inclusion of any antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and offensive terms in the search strategies. This process

should include consulting with the team or other topic experts, running test searches, and examining the use of the term(s) in past and current literature. For example: It might be unnecessary to include an antiquated term when it is combined with a modern concept because there would not be a reasonable expectation for relevant results.

- Search developers should explain the necessity of including antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and offensive search terms in search strategies to team members, and use (or adapt) the suggested wording below in the manuscript and supplemental materials.
- Wherever possible, authors should avoid using antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms in the manuscript. These terms can be relegated to appendices and supplements, where an appropriate notice and explanation should be provided. To describe the search in the manuscript, authors can strip the searches of any antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms and describe them ambiguously while pointing to the supplements and appendices for full search details.
- Authors should acknowledge the use of antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms wherever they appear, including the manuscript, the full search strategies, and any other supplementary materials.

Suggested wording for addressing antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms in systematic searches

The following text is provided as suggested wording, and should be customized as appropriate. Place the specific research community name/topic in the _____ spaces.

[Manuscript]

Language changes over time and varies geographically and by community, including within the _____ research community. There are many cases where antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms for _____ have been used in past and present literature. In light of this, the authors have included such terms in search strategies in order to conduct a sensitive, comprehensive search for relevant studies. The authors of this review recognize and acknowledge the inappropriate and harmful nature of these terms, and will include indicators in this article where they are written so that the reader can determine how they would like to proceed. Full details of all search strategies are available in [appendix, supplement, etc].

[In-text Indicators]

This paragraph includes antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms for _____

This figure includes antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms for _____

This table includes antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms for _____

[Search Report/Supplement/Appendix]

There are many cases where antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms for _____ have been used in past and present literature. In light of this, the authors have included such terms in search strategies in order to conduct a sensitive, comprehensive search for relevant studies. The authors of this review recognize and acknowledge the inappropriate and harmful nature of these terms, and indicate that the full search strategies include them, so that the reader can determine how they would like to proceed.

[Consultations]

While teams may be familiar with the various antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive terms used for their topics, it can be uncomfortable to spend time with their use in research during search development and screening. Some team members may be unfamiliar with certain terms, or struggle to understand why they should be included in the search at all. The phrase below can be customized and used in consultation and search development settings.

"We've built a good list of search terms for _____. Evidence syntheses [or relevant review design] require us to be as comprehensive as possible in the search, so in order to find all of the available evidence we need to include all of the words, past and present, that an author may have used in their article on _____. Some of these words are antiquated, non-standard, exclusionary, and potentially offensive. Are you comfortable working with me to identify and include these terms?"

→ if NO, offer to develop the searches yourself and/or in consultation with a topic expert, and determine how the team will review them.