

ARTICLE REVIEW GUIDELINES

As part of the defining of your research project, you will be reading various articles in the literature. Part of your training in this course is to develop a scientific approach to evaluating the content of an article or a text. This ability will not just help you towards managing your final project research but will also help you in your practice. How so you say? Very simply, in either policy or clinical practice, you will be required to evaluate documents (other people's professional research writings). You need to develop skills to assess the importance of those documents not just to your immediate practice, but to your organization or to political change. One of the critical goals of this course is to assist you in fine-tuning that ability. Towards that end, the following is a set of things to keep in mind as you read your articles. Remember, these topics are the identical topics you will be required to address in your IRB proposal and to present in your final end-of-the year research presentation. Keep this sheet with you as a checklist when you read.

1) Citation

- a) Become familiar with the APA citation rules. You will have to have all of your literature references cited correctly. Practice with the articles that you read. It is also good to keep an on-going bibliography. Your final paper and your IRB proposal will need to cite the literature. You will need to keep track of what you have read.

2) Rationale and Purpose

- a) What is the rationale for this study? What social conditions are under study? Can you state the basic research problem in one sentence?
- b) What in the literature has created interest in such a study? Is the cited literature relevant? Does the literature review appear to be complete/thorough/up to date? Have any relevant articles/studies been omitted?
- c) Is the study important to social work?
 - i) How so?
 - ii) If not, why not?
- d) Is the purpose of the study explanatory, evaluative, descriptive or multi-purpose?
- e) What is the research question(s) and/or hypothesis(es) of the study? How did the author(s) explain the importance of the research problem? Do you feel that it was a justifiable explanation? Is this problem related to practice or to policy or to both? Explain your reasoning.
- f) Is there a theoretical framework presented? What is it? Are there alternative frameworks? Are the stated hypotheses justifiable within the theoretical framework?
- g) What do the researchers intend to accomplish with this study? What are the independent, dependent, proxy, and confounding variables addressed in the study? How are they operationalized? Are they operationalized adequately? Do you believe that they are operationalized correctly? Could some be operationalized differently?
- h) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the study?
 - i) Strengths
 - ii) Weaknesses

3) Methods and General Procedures

- a) IRB approval stated?

- i) Does the article state it has IRB approval for the study?
 - If not, why not?
- ii) Does the article mention any respect for subject rights?
 - If not, why not?
- b) Do the authors present a study design? How well do you feel the design is described? Does it fit the study? If not, why not? What is the study design (cross-sectional study vs. longitudinal study)? Why do you think the authors chose this study design? Does the choice of study design eliminate alternative hypotheses? If so, how?
- c) Have the authors addressed the issues of internal and external validity of the study? If so how? Do you see any problems in these areas?
- d) What are the units of analysis? What types of data are being collected?
- e) Sample Population
 - i) Type of sample (probability vs. non- probability)
 - ii) What specific type of sampling method was used? How is it justified?
 - iii) Size of sample and size of samples in all subgroups in the study
 - iv) Recruitment of sample/sampling methods
 - v) Selection
 - Inclusion criteria
 - Exclusion criteria
 - vi) Sample appropriate for study? How representative of the entire population is the sample? Are all appropriate sub-populations represented in the study? Have the authors explained why certain groups were either eliminated or included? What do you think?
 - vii) What is the likelihood of generalizability of the findings to other populations based upon the sample and study design?
 - Not enough people per group?
 - viii) Careful delineation of variables of importance. How are variables operationalized by the authors? Are operational definitions adequate? What are the units of analysis? Were they appropriate for the research question and the hypotheses? Are the arguments open to fallacious reasoning? If so how?
 - Independent variables
 - Dependent variables
 - Covariates
 - Level of measurement
 - ix) Do the choices of variables fit within the framework of the study and the theoretical construct of the study? Was a direction of association hypothesized? Do you think appropriate relationships were conceptualized?
 - x) Measurement instruments used in the study
 - Are they standardized instruments or not?
 - (a) If not, why not
 - What is the reliability/validity of the instruments? How was it established? Could more have been done to establish the validity/reliability of the instruments? Were the populations used to validate the instrument appropriate for/relevant to the current study?

- Is this a qualitative, evidenced-based, or meta-analysis study? Address criteria used. What form of qualitative study, what were the inclusion/exclusion criteria for the meta-analysis, etc.
- What is the rationale for selecting specific instruments
- Are the selected instruments appropriate for the study?
- How was the study conducted?
 - (a) Were there control groups?
 - (b) Were there study groups?
 - (c) What did the participants have to do?
 - (d) Were participants given informed consent?
 - ⇒ If yes, why? If not, why not?
 - (e) Did the study address minorities?
 - ⇒ If yes, which ones? If not, why not?
 - ⇒ How inclusive was the study?
- Is the study design cross-sectional or longitudinal or both? If it is longitudinal, what type of design is it? Could it have been improved in any way by collecting a different form of data or more of the data that the authors already collected? If it was cross-sectional, could the research problem have been more effectively addressed as a longitudinal study?
- Were any causal assertions made or implied in the hypotheses?
- Should any other variables be measured or controlled for? If so, which ones and why?
- Did the study design eliminate alternative explanations and how did the design do this?
 - (a) What is the setting for the study? Does the setting limit the study in any way?
 - (b) How were the data collected? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this particular method of data collection?
- f) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the study protocol and design?

4) Statistical Methodology and Data Presentation

- a) What statistical tests were used to analyze the data?
- b) What software was used?
- c) What significance levels were set?
- d) Were the tests and levels appropriate for the type of hypothesis(es) being tested?
- e) Could other tests have been used that were more appropriate?
- f) How was data presented graphically? Was it understandable? Relevant to the discussion? Did the presentations “trick or trap” the reader?

5) Study Results

- a) What was the response rate/participation rate in the study? Is there a potential bias based upon respondent type? What about the group that did not respond?
- b) What are the findings? Did the authors present them adequately?
- c) Were there significant findings found between/among the variables of interest?
 - i) Are the findings statistically significant?

- ii) Are they clinically significant? Findings can be statistically significant and useless from an application perspective.
- iii) Were any causal assumptions made or implied. Did the data support these assumptions/hypotheses? Should other variables have been measured/controlled?
- d) Are there other ways to interpret the results? If so, what ways and what do they yield that is different from what is being reported by the authors?
- e) Strengths and weaknesses
- f) Future directions for research. Do these results yield new/additional insights extending the literature in the field?
- g) Implications for Social Work practice and policy

6) Discussion

- a) Were the conclusions and discussion presented adequately? Were they well-grounded in the study findings or did they appear to be spurious?
 - i) Can you think of any other interpretations of the findings?
 - ii) How do the results of this study compare to the results of other studies in the same area?
 - iii) In what ways was this study more or less adequate than other studies in this area?
- b) Implications
- c) Strengths and limitations
- d) Answer the “so what” question

7) Ethics

- a) Is the study ethically consistent?
- b) Was there a tradeoff between ethical guidelines for different groups? What about a tradeoff between ethics and scientific rigor?
- c) Based upon the information provided, could you replicate this study?