

THINKING ABOUT CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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How can one critically analyze a document, an article, a thesis, a proposal, an idea or anything, for that matter? Why should we critically analyze the world around us? What difference does it make to critically analyze a phenomenon?

While these questions cannot be easily answered in a few brief sentences, it is worth pointing out that meaningful, engaged democratic participation requires, to varying degrees, the ability to understand, relate to, and diagnose, or critically analyze, the society in which one lives. This is not to say that every conversation, every relationship, every policy, and every manifestation of interaction in society involves a power dynamic that must be de-constructed. However, as Paulo Friere and others have noted, there are numerous factors at-play that can serve to subjugate and marginalize individuals and groups.

Thus, an understanding and critical appreciation of how issues are constructed requires reflection, introspection and critical analysis of one's identity, experiences, perspectives and perceptions as well as how power is utilized. Areas to consider include:

- How identity is socially constructed;
- How the mainstream media serves the interests of limited sectors;
- How schools function, and especially how they are not are not neutral, apolitical institutions;
- How democracy involves much more than elections.

Critical analysis is not a description of an issue. Sociological issues are not simply factual phenomena. They are shaped by historical and contemporary forces, and result from decisionmaking processes that may not be entirely representative of the interests for which they have been called on to shape policy. Therefore, embracing a multi-layered interrogation of how the context for various issues is constructed is pivotal.

What are some techniques for critically analyzing an issue?

1. Examine the context (how did it become an issue and why?)
2. Who is defining the issue, based on what, and why?
3. What does the issue look like elsewhere (comparative analysis)?
4. What do various groups and stakeholders say about the issue (students, teachers, administrators, parents, rural/urban, white/minority, rich/poor, the business sector, non-traditional groups, etc.)?
5. What factors were considered in conceptualizing the issue (legal, political, social, economic, educational, etc.)?
6. What is not said in the article/report/issue (where are the gaps)?
7. What does the research (more on this below) say about the issue?
8. Is the issue reported on fairly, in a balanced way?
9. Is there a hidden agenda to the issue?
10. How does the formal rhetoric mesh with the informal reality (i.e., policy development versus policy implementation)?
11. What is the ideology driving the issue?

There are dozens of other questions that could help frame a critical analysis of any particular issue. The underpinning for any such analysis is that issues need to be approached from a critical vantage-point, that rigorous, disciplined effort should be consecrated on the de-construction of a particular issue, and, importantly, that diverse perspectives and approaches (i.e., feminist, anti-racist, structuralist, functionalist, conflict-centered, neo-liberal) should be considered and problematized when examining an issue.

Below is a guide that offers some more direction as to how to critically analyze an issue.

GUIDE FOR CRITIQUING RESEARCH

There are many approaches and factors to consider when critiquing research. What follows is a guide to help students cover a number of the bases. There is no one penultimate list of issues to consider but this guide will illuminate a range of

important issues.

Introduction

1. Is there a significant social problem here that needs to be addressed? Is there an articulated need to address this problem?
2. What rationale does the study provide for examining this topic? Does it make sense?
3. Does the research provide evidence that supports the stated rationale? What is the nature of this evidence? Are the sources credible?
4. What theory or body of literature does the researcher use to provide a perspective on the phenomenon that is being explored? Is it appropriate? Is the review critical?
5. Are divergent perspectives considered in framing the problem? Are they fairly presented?
6. Does the researcher provide a question, hypothesis or central focus for the study? Is it manageable? Does it fall in line with the rationale, and the review of the literature and theory? Does it follow from the social problem implied or stated in the study?

Methods

7. What methods does the researcher employ? In other words, how does the researcher go about answering the question or questions that were posed?
8. Does the researcher adequately describe the setting? Is the setting appropriate? Are the subtleties, nuances and particular considerations of relevance adequately highlighted?
9. Does the researcher adequately describe the methods employed? What data are collected? How does the researcher collect the data? Are these methods appropriate? Does the researcher describe in sufficient detail the sampling techniques? Are they appropriate for the study?
10. Does the researcher describe how the data were analyzed? Is the analysis appropriate?
11. Do the methods allow the researcher to answer the questions that were posed? Will the methods generate the type of data that will answer the question?
12. Do the methods generate credible data?
13. Are the data collected in an ethical way?

14. Does the researcher bring to the study any idiosyncrasies that might obviously shape the data? Does the researcher account for these?
15. Does the research address his/her own implication in the research? For example, did the researcher's presence, identity or approach illicit a reaction that might be construed as biased? Similarly, was the researcher able to leverage his/her presence, identity and approach in order to draw out reflections that may not otherwise be forthcoming?

Results

16. What kinds of findings does the researcher report? How are the findings contextualized?
17. Do the findings answer the question(s) posed? Are they organized in a way that answers the question(s)?
18. Are the findings consistent with the methods employed?
19. Are the findings adequately described?

Conclusions

20. What conclusions does the researcher reach?
21. Do the findings justify the conclusions?

General

22. Is the study credible? Do you believe what the researchers tell you?
23. What is the underlying purpose of the study? Who will benefit from it? What effect is it likely to have?
24. Would other types of methodology could shape the research in a diverse way?
25. Are there any other problems with the study?