

# Questions to Ask When Critiquing a Study

## If you are critiquing an academic study:<sup>1</sup>

- What phenomenon is the study trying to explain? Is it a phenomenon that needs explaining?
- What explanation does the author provide?
- What is the author assuming about the world in making her argument? Are these assumptions reasonable? Are they supported by evidence?
- What is the dependent variable/outcome/result being measured? Does it match the stated purpose of the study?
- What is the primary independent variable/treatment/determinant? Does it match the stated purpose of the study?
- Who are the respondents being sampled? Do they match the population we are interested in?
- How were the data collected? Is this an appropriate method given what the study is trying to learn? Do the data accurately measure what they are supposed to measure?
- Do the conclusions follow from the evidence provided? Are there other explanations for the patterns seen in the data?
- What evidence would convince you that the author was wrong? Did the author design the study to show such evidence if it exists?
- Is the study replicable? If you had the resources, could you reproduce this study and have a reasonable chance of getting similar results?

## If you are critiquing a policy evaluation:<sup>2</sup>

- Is the outcome of the policy something we care about?
- How big is the impact of the policy? Does it make a noticeable difference in people's lives?
- What is the cost of the policy – financially, socially or politically? Is this cost reasonable, possible, and/or sustainable? Is there a less costly way to produce the same outcome?
- Has the author compared the effect of the policy to a counterfactual – either of not implementing any policy or of implementing a different policy?

## If you are critiquing an op-ed, brief, or "think piece":<sup>3</sup>

- Does the author support her assertions with evidence? Is the evidence gathered from or consistent with high-quality academic studies?
- Are all assertions meaningful enough that they could be tested? Is it possible to identify the evidence that would confirm or refute each claim?
- Are terms/concepts well defined and used consistently?
- Is the argument internally consistent and devoid of irrelevant/distracting information?
- Has the author considered the counterfactual – either of not implementing any solution or of implementing a different solution?

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<sup>1</sup> This type of article is published in an academic journal (e.g. American Political Science Review) and presents original analysis conducted by the author.

<sup>2</sup> This type of article provides evidence on the outcome of a specific policy and is usually published by a policy organization (e.g. World Bank)

<sup>3</sup> This type of article is often published in news magazines (e.g. The Economist), but may also be published in an academic or policy journal. It may summarize existing research, or just present the author's opinion, but does not provide original data or analysis.