Tip Sheet

Reading Research & Evaluation Reports

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Purpose

It is important to think critically about any study or evaluation and to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses before using the findings

Key Points

- The study's purpose should be clear and relevant

- The sample should be generalizable to a larger population

- The measures should be relevant to the purpose and an accurate way of testing the variables or relationships the study is looking at

- The design should allow for logical conclusions to be drawn from the data and should minimize the ways other factors might influence the results

- The analyses should be relevant to the purpose of the study

- The conclusions and recommendations must be supported by the data

Introduction

The introduction of the report should explain the purpose of the study or evaluation and it should situate the project in the context of other research and/or the field of practice. Questions that can help you critically assess the purpose and context of the study include:

◊ What is the purpose of the study?

◊ Does the purpose reflect an accurate understanding of sexual violence and/or prevention?

◊ How useful might the study be to the field?

◊ Is the study based on a relevant theory or is was it developed in relation to other important work in the field?

Method

The report should describe the method used to collect the data. If it is an intervention study, then the intervention should also be described with enough detail that you have a good idea of what the intervention strategy was, its intensity, and how it was implemented. Questions that can help you critically assess the method include:

Sample

◊ Who participated in the study?

◊ What larger groups could that sample be used to generalize to? What groups does the sample not generalize to?

◊ How many people were included in the study?

Is this enough to let you generalize to the larger population?

◊ Do you have any concerns about the way people were recruited creating any biases in the sample?

Measures

◊ What kinds of data were collected and for what purpose?

◊ How relevant are the data to the purpose of the study?

⇒ Knowledge should be measured by assessing the degree to which people know certain facts

⇒ Attitudes and beliefs should be measured in ways that assess how much people agree with or believe a statement or what their opinions are about a specific issue or experience

⇒ Behaviors should be measured by assessing the likelihood of behaving in certain ways or actual behaviors over a certain time period

⇒ Motivations should be measured by assessing the perceived risks and benefits of behaving in certain ways or how much certain thoughts play into decision making

◊ Were the data measured in a way that promotes accuracy? Or are there ways that inaccuracies or bias may have been introduced?

Design

The design must fit the purpose of the study. It should, to the extent possible, eliminate rival explanations for the findings. These might include: biases in how the sample was formed, systematic differences in attrition, historical events that influence the outcome, natural maturation that can account for the outcome, groups that are in different conditions influencing one another, participants giving the answers or exhibiting the behaviors they think the researchers want to see, and the measurement tool itself bringing about changes. Questions that can help you critically assess the design include:

◊ Is the study designed to describe a single group, compare groups, or look for change over time? Does that design fit with what was measured and how the data were collected?

◊ If groups are going to be compared, how similar are the groups at the beginning?

◊ If groups are followed over time, how many drop out before the end of the study? Is there reason to be concerned that the people who dropped out are systematically different from the people who stayed in?

◊ Is there anything done in the intervention or when collecting data that might bias the results?

◊   Are there other possible explanations that cannot be ruled out with this design?

Results

The results need to be based on quantitative and/or qualitative analyses that match the purpose of the study and the way variables were measured. Questions that can help you critically assess the results include:

◊   Is the data analysis appropriate to the kind of data collected and the purpose of the study?

◊   In plain English, what did the analyses find? (Remember: When inferential statistics are run — those that generate a p-value — only when the finding is statistically significant can you talk about there being a difference between groups, a change over time, or a relationship between variables.)

◊   Which of the findings were expected and make sense to you? Which ones were unexpected or surprising? Can unexpected or surprising results be explained in light of the intervention, procedures and measures?

◊   How important are the results? Do they shed light on issues important to the field? Can they be used to inform or improve practice?

Discussion and Recommendations

The discussion and recommendations should come from the results. While this is a place where some speculation is permissible, watch out for conclusions that are not fully supported by the data. Questions that   can help you critically assess the conclusions include:

◊   Does the summary of findings match the results? Do the authors talk about differences that were not
significant as if they were? Do they talk as if one thing caused another when their design does not support a causal conclusion?

◊   Are there alternative explanations for the findings that should be considered?

◊   What relevance do the findings have for practice?

◊   What are the limitations of the study or cautions about applying the findings?