Dissecting Research Articles: Action Research and Program Evaluation

In this activity, you will read an action research article or a program evaluation article and answer a series of questions. Please answer the questions posed in each section.

Abstract, Introduction, Research Question, and the Literature Review

1. The Introduction to the paper contains a number of important points. "An abstract is a brief, comprehensive summary of the contents of the article; it allows the readers to survey the contents of an article quickly and, like a title, it enables the persons interested in the document to retrieve it from abstracting and indexing databases" (APA, 2010, p. 25). Does the abstract clearly and accurately summarize the main elements of the study? What part of the abstract is least clearly summarized or is missing?

2. The introduction describes the research topic and presents the problem statement. The introduction should inform the reader regarding the potential of the research to provide important and relevant answers. State the topic of the research and describe the problem. Quote the sentence(s) explaining why the problem is important and why this topic is worth researching.

3. The research questions should be clearly stated. What are the research questions? If they are not stated explicitly, look at how the author(s) analyzed the data. Derive at least one research question from the data analysis. For example, a t-test compares the average level of X between 2 groups. Therefore, the research question may look like: Are there significant differences between males' and females' average level of income? A qualitative study may be examining the unique experience of a particular group of people. Therefore, a qualitative research question may look like: What is the lived experience of lesbians accessing adoption services?

4. The literature review outlines the theory and past findings that are relevant to the research goals. The literature review should document the importance of the research problem. Quote the specific sentences that support the need to study these research questions. Do the authors build a logical argument that supports the study? Support your analysis.

5. What theoretical framework was used to guide the research? Describe the link from the theory to the variables or constructs. If the theory is not discussed, make an educated guess about a good theoretical fit and clearly link the variables or constructs to your choice of theory. For example, Bandura's Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1971) presumes that the way people learn is by modeling behavior and getting reinforced (either negatively or positively) for that behavior. This means that a research study using Social Learning Theory MUST be measuring modeling behavior and reinforcement.

Methodology – Research Design, Methods and Procedures, and Sampling

6. Describe the research design. Is it qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods? What specific design subtype--qualitative (e.g. phenomenological), quantitative (e.g. correlational), or mixed method (e.g. case study)?

7. Describe the methods and procedures for data collection. List a step by step description of how the study was conducted. From the authors' write-up, could you go out and conduct a replica of this study?

8. Do you think the research design was well crafted to answer the research questions? Could the author(s) have changed the design to better address the research questions? Justify your analysis.

9. Sampling refers to the process of obtaining the research participants to be part of the study. The sampling section should clearly indicate the specific procedures used to recruit the participants. It should also indicate the sample size and the eligibility criteria. To evaluate the research evidence, it is important to know who the participants are and how they were chosen. Describe how participants were recruited and selected. How many participants were recruited for the study?

10. The sampling strategy should be clearly explained. How did they choose who would be in their study? What is the name of this sampling strategy? Did they have different units of analysis (e.g. describe all types of sampling for different pieces of data collection, evaluation of site data, forms, paperwork, statistics, observations, etc.)? List them and describe the sampling strategy for each unit of analysis.

Information Specific to Action Research Methodology (If you are dissecting a program evaluation article answer questions 11b and 12b)

In presenting the action research study, there needs to a clear and detailed description about the "action" piece, or how the stakeholders were involved in any aspect of the study.

11a. List each way the stakeholders or community members were involved in the study.

12a. What type of action research was used for the study? (Examples: community-based participatory action research, action research according to Stringer (2013), action research according to Greenwood and Levin (2007), etc.).

Information Specific to Program Evaluation Methodology (If you are dissecting an action research article answer questions 11a and 12a).

In presenting the program evaluation study, there needs to a clear and detailed description about what is being evaluated.

11b. What were the primary components of the program being evaluated?

12b. What type of program evaluation was used for the study? (Examples: formative evaluation, summative evaluation, process evaluation, outcome evaluation, impact evaluation, etc.)

Analysis, Findings, Discussion, and Ethics

The results section of an action research study may include both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The reader should be able to say, “I understand,” or “That makes perfect sense.” The presentation of the data should convince the reader of the credibility of the data analysis.

13. The presentation of the data permits the reader to understand how the results were analyzed and interpreted. Sometimes the quality of the research results can be judged by the reaction of the reader. Do you think the results of this article are believable?

14. Were the data collected quantitative or qualitative? How were the data analyzed?

When evaluating an article, look first for the scientific research evidence. Again, examples of nonscientific evidence are opinions, value judgments, personal experiences, unsupported assertions, and second-hand reports.

The results section must thoroughly explain how the data were collected and how the data were analyzed. The results must be described in detail in order to justify the conclusions or the interpretation of the data. The results should be presented in enough detail to allow the reader to evaluate the results.

15. What were the main findings of the study?

16. Were the conclusions or generalizations valid and justified by the data analysis? Support your analysis.

17. Were the research questions addressed? What were the author(s) conclusions? Were there any examples of nonscientific evidence presented?

Addressing ethical concerns in research is of particular importance and should always include the fundamentals listed here:

- Informed consent should be written or presented in a way that fully informs the participant of the nature of the research project and what is expected.
- Harm or loss of dignity refers to the participant's right to not be physically or mentally harmed.
- The study design should incorporate procedures to ensure that information is stored in locked areas and no one outside of the study will have access to participant's information. The researcher must protect either the confidentiality or anonymity of the participants.
- Participants should be informed that they have the right to decline or withdraw from the research at any time without consequences.

18. Describe how the study design protected the participants (e.g. how did they protect the participants when recruiting, interviewing, collecting data, stripping any identifying information, presenting findings, etc.).

19. After presenting the results, the researcher interprets the research findings and provides recommendations for further research or suggestions for practical application of the research findings. Describe the recommendations for future research or practical application. Do you agree with the recommendations? Support your analysis.

20. What were the limitations of the study? Include an analysis of how study feasibility impacts the practical aspects of implementing a study.

21. In one paragraph, evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the study. Support your analysis.