



The Essentials of Evaluating Research Reports

FACT SHEET



Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network
602-251 Bank Street, Ottawa ON K2P 1X3
Phone: (613) 567-1817
Fax: (613) 567-4652
Toll Free: 1-888-285-2226

The Essentials of Evaluating Research Reports

In community-based research (CBR) an essential research skill is learning how to evaluate other people's research. Evaluating other's research can be reduced to answering the basic question; when I find information about a topic I want to know more about, how do I know what to believe? (Stern, 1979) Stern points out that as you set out to research something new, "[t]he less you know about the question you are asking, the more you should expect to learn." (p.5) In addition, as more information is reviewed about the topic of interest, more will also be learned about the language used to describe the topic.

There are several reasons why learning how to evaluate research reports is important. When preparing a new research report it is necessary to know about and acknowledge the work that others have already published about the same topic. When exploring ideas for a new research project, evaluating what is already published helps to identify where there are gaps in understanding about a topic narrowing the focus of a new project to fill in missing knowledge. Other research reports provide ideas for how to approach a question and also give information about approaches that did not work out well. Research reports are also useful resources for finding additional sources of information by reviewing the bibliography at the end of the report.

One of the main approaches to social science research is referred to as critical social science. Neuman defines Critical Social Science "as a critical process of inquiry that goes beyond surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves" (p. 74). A critical approach is used to review other's research on the basis of a set of moral-political values that are grounded in the sense that some positions are right and some are wrong. This is an approach often used by community action groups, political organizations, and social movements (Neuman, 1997). Critical evaluation methods can be used to evaluate all types of social science reports and the methods, information and interpretation of their findings (Girden 2001, Peat 2002).

To begin with, when reviewing a research report it must be clear what the point of the research was. With the end result in mind it is then possible to look over the research report to decide if the supporting information is convincing or not. As listed below, there are a number of questions that can be asked while reading a research report. Learning how to answer these

questions is based on experience, the set of values that form the basis for a critical assessment and the quality of the information provided in the article or book. Basically, the author should give enough information about the desired outcomes of the research, how the research was done (the methods), how participants became involved, how many participants were included (the sample), and how the conclusions are related to the outcomes of the research process.

Evaluating research for CAAN involves examining a report to answer the following questions (Girden, 2001; Kooy & Vizina, 2006):

- For what purpose is the research occurring and therefore, whose needs are being served?
- What is the origin of the research? How was the literature generated and by whom?
- What does the research intend to accomplish?
- What are the assumptions underpinning the research process?
- Who is participating in the discussion and who is not? How were research participants selected? Were any participants lost during the process or left out of the final analysis?
- What is the study design? Were the methods clear? Is the data collection consistent with the methods?
- How was the data analyzed? Was the analysis appropriate? Accurate?
- What expertise is being drawn upon within the discussion?
- What were the major conclusions? Are they justified (valid)? Can the results be generalized? To which population(s)?
- What factors might impact the translation of the research in regards to HIV/AIDS into health outcomes and improvement in health status for APHAS and Aboriginal peoples? and;
- To what degree is the research perceived to have resulted in changes to policy, practice and health outcomes for AASOs and APHAs?

OVERVIEW

The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network is a national, not-for-profit organization:

- Established in 1997
- Represents over 200 member organizations and individuals
- Governed by a National thirteen member Board of Directors
- A four member Executive Board of Directors
- Provides a National forum for members to express needs and concerns
- Ensures access to HIV/AIDS-related services through advocacy
- Provides relevant, accurate and up-to-date HIV/AIDS information

MISSION STATEMENT

As a key national voice of a collection of individuals, organizations and provincial/territorial associations, CAAN provides leadership, support and advocacy for Aboriginal people living with and affected by HIV/AIDS. CAAN faces the challenges created by HIV/AIDS in a spirit of wholeness and healing that promotes empowerment, inclusion, and honours the cultural traditions, uniqueness and diversity of all First Nations, Inuit and Métis people regardless of where they reside.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Production of this document has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research.

March 2006

ISBN No.: I-894624-44-0

Renee Masching
Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network
602-251 Bank Street, Ottawa ON K2P 1X3
Phone: (613) 567-1817 • Toll Free: 1-888-285-2226
Fax: (613) 567-4652
Email: info@caan.ca • www.caan.ca

The following points suggest some of the ways to evaluate a research report and approaches to be aware of:

- Methods can include observation, case study, document review, experiments, etc.
- If observations were used question if you believe that different observers of the same people or events would describe the same outcome(s)
- Participants are drawn from a population of people, things or events. It is rarely possible to involve all of the population in a study so a “sample” is used. A sample is a “group of some members of a population” (Stern, 1979, p.31). The research report should indicate who the research participants in the sample are meant to represent.
- Question if the sample really reflects the larger population it claims to represent for example, similar numbers of men and women, youth and elders, disability and no disability, etc.
- Evaluating the results put forward in the research report is based on questions such as:
 - Does the data support the conclusions in the specific instance studied?
 - Can the results be generalized to other situations with the same type of variables?
 - Are there other explanations for the results? Did the presence of the researcher make a difference? Are participants trying to impress the researcher? Has the researcher influenced the participants through the power of suggestion, personal relationships, or researcher expectations/self fulfilling prophecy?
 - Has some other explanation been ignored? What steps were taken to limit the impact of other variables? Are there alternative interpretations?

Conclusion

The ability to evaluate social science research is an important skill for community-based research. In day-to-day life, the ability to evaluate statements about research is also very useful. When a television commercial suggests that 3 out of 4 Doctors recommend a product it is helpful to be aware of questions such as; which Doctors? How many Doctors were approached? As the ability to evaluate the quality of another researcher’s report increases, this will also improve the quality of writing by the researcher and their team.

Notes:

A number of sources were consulted in preparing this Fact Sheet. The Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network (CAAN) acknowledges the contribution of the following sources:

Clarke J.N., Friedman D.B. and Hoffman-Goetz L. Canadian Aboriginal people’s experience with HIV/AIDS as portrayed in selected English language Aboriginal media (1996-2000). *Soc. Sci. Med.* 60, 2169-2180, 2005

Girden E.R. *Evaluating Research Articles*. 2nd Edition. Sage Publications Inc., Thousand Oaks Ca. 2001.

Kooy, Racelle & Vizina, Yvonne. *Indigenous Knowledge “In Focus”*. Canadian Cultural Observatory. Retrieved from http://www.culturescope.ca/ev_en.php. 2006.

Peat J.K. *Health Science Research. A Handbook of Quantitative Methods*. Sage Publications Inc., Thousand Oaks Ca. 2002.

Stern, Paul C. *Evaluating Social Science Research*. Oxford University Press, New York. 1979.