

The Critical Essay 2017

Choose **ONE** of the articles from the list that will be posted on: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~sfos0015/> (look under Teaching, Research Design HT 2017) in a pdf titled **Critical Essay 2017**. The list will be posted no later than 12.00 noon, Monday of 0th week of Trinity Term 2017.

All of the articles will be available online at <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/finding-resources> (follow the links from OU e-Journals)

Imagine that the article has not yet been published and has been submitted to the (fictional) *Oxford Journal of Sociology*. You have been asked by the editor of the OJS to write a methodological assessment of the article. Your assessment should be no longer than 2500 words long and must be submitted as per the deadline instructions in the Student Handbook (MSc page 24, MPhil page25).

You should provide a critical assessment of the following methodological aspects of the article:

- 1) The clarity with which the central questions and hypotheses are stated;
- 2) The appropriateness of the general research design (including sampling) to the objectives of the research ie is causality being explicitly investigated? Implicitly assumed?
- 3) The measurement of key indicators (including validity and reliability issues);
- 4) The appropriateness of the data analysis techniques used;
- 5) The correspondence between what the author(s) claim and what their reported data analysis actually demonstrates.

Advice

- 1) Reading and evaluating an academic article is not easy. Articles are written for a very specific professional audience and assume an intellectual context that will be unknown to the casual reader: they are rarely written with graduate students in mind. The object of the exercise is not to understand the substantive context or evaluate the substantive content of the article, but you may find it helpful to do a **small** amount of background reading – perhaps a couple of key citations mentioned in the article itself.
- 2) Organize what you write in a logical sequence. For want of anything better you could use the headings given above.
- 3) It is hard to find contemporary professional articles that use only techniques that you will already be acquainted with. The research frontier is a long way ahead of Introduction to Quantitative Methods. There is however nothing in these article which should be completely incomprehensible to anyone who makes a serious effort. You are not required to spend a vast amount of time researching arcane techniques.
- 4) Try to strike a balance between hyper-criticality and awe struck reverence. Journals impose strict word limits on article length. That is why they assume a lot of background knowledge in the reader. Criticizing an article for that is not reasonable. Likewise criticizing an article because the author didn't single handed carry out a 25 year panel survey that would have consumed the whole social science budget of the United Kingdom is too facile. At the same

time don't believe that everything that is published automatically makes sense. All sorts of nonsense is published, even in the best journals. Authors do try to sweep difficulties under the carpet and can be less than impartial in the way they interpret evidence for and against their pet hypotheses. We are all human.

- 5) This is an exercise in close reading and detailed analysis drawing on all you have learned so far from the methodological courses you have taken. The examiners do not want to read something that is analogous to the Platte River – a mile wide and six inches deep. The idea is to take the article apart and examine it bit by bit before putting it all together again and reaching a judgment about what is good and less good about it.
- 6) It should go without saying that **you cannot collaborate with anyone** to produce your essay. It must be **entirely your own work**. Don't discuss what you are doing with anyone else, don't leave your work where it can be read by anyone else. The examiners will be on the lookout for any inexplicable similarities between essays. The examiners will also be monitoring the usual essay mill websites. If any examination irregularities are suspected by the Chair of Examiners the assessment will be aborted and everyone will be called for assessment under strict examination conditions. That would be tedious for me and I don't suppose you will be overjoyed. It's in our mutual interests that everyone does what they are supposed to do in the way they are supposed to do it.

Colin Mills
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