# Tools for Analyzing Community and Prevention Research Reports

Maurice Elias
Rutgers University

James H. Dalton
Bloomsburg University

**Editor's Note**

This document presents questions for students to ask in reviewing, analyzing and using the published literature in community research or prevention/promotion.  It can be used to focus student reading for a variety of course assignments:  article reviews, research proposals, social policy briefs, action letters, or other assignments that require analysis of published literature.

This document contains two exercises that appear in:

Dalton, J., Elias, M.J., & Wandersman, A.  (2007).  *Community psychology: Linking individuals and communities* (2nd. ed.).  Belmont, CA:  Thomson/Wadsworth. www.thomsonedu.com

## Analyzing a Community Research Report

The purpose of this exercise is to analyze a study in community psychology or a related field. Choose a journal article or other research report that presents an empirical research study. If you can, choose an article on an issue or topic about which you care deeply. Record the full reference so you can identify and cite it later.

Analyze the study using the following questions. (Not all questions will apply to all studies.) Add your own questions if needed. Identify both the strengths and limitations of the research.

**Purposes**
1. What were the purposes of this study?
2. Was this study descriptive, studying an existing issue? Or did it evaluate the effects of a social program, policy, or other change?
3. Did the researchers take sides on a controversial social issue? Did the study sample marginalized populations or unheard voices? Did it address an issue of social justice?
4. What ecological levels of analysis did this study concern?

**Relationships with Community**
(These issues may be difficult to discern in published works.)
5. Did the researchers work with community members in a participatory-collaborative relationship? How? What decisions about conducting the research were shared, in what ways?
6. Did the study make a positive difference in the community in which it was conducted? Did the researchers provide products of the research to that community, in a form that could be used by citizens? Did the study strengthen or empower the community to pursue its own goals after the study was completed?

**Sampling**
7. What culture(s) were studied in this research? Was this a "within-cultural-group" or "between-cultural-groups" study? Did the researchers report steps to assure that their concepts and methods were applicable in the culture(s) they studied?
8. How were the specific participants in this study chosen? Were they studied in a specific context: e.g., a community setting, organization, locality, or culture?
9. How diverse was the sample studied? Consider the multiple dimensions of human diversity. Did the study sample populations often underrepresented in psychological research?

**Methods and Analysis**
10. What research methods did this study use?
11. Did this study use multiple methods, measures, data sources or other means of triangulation?
12. How were the data analyzed? If qualitative analyses were used, what procedures were used for coding themes or categories, and for assuring agreement on these among multiple judges? If quantitative analyses were used, are they appropriate for these data? Was the sample size sufficient for the statistics used?

**Findings and Validity**
13. What were the most important findings? (Choose about three or fewer.)
14. Did the study identify strengths of a population, community, or culture? What strengths?
15. If the study reported on whether a social innovation, intervention, program, or policy attained its goals: What goals were attained? How were they measured or assessed? Can you think of any other

factors (i.e., confounds) that might also account for the findings? Can you identify possible unintended negative consequences that might have occurred?
16. Are you convinced of the truth of the researchers' conclusions or claims? Why?

**Personal Reactions**
17. What emotions did you experience while reading or thinking about this study? Why?
18. How could you apply the findings of this study in communities in your own life?
19. What do you think were the principal limitations of this study? How might your views be based in your own experiences?
20. If the study is a recent one, consider writing an email to its principal author. What questions do you have that you would like the author to answer? What would you suggest for a further study on this issue, and why?

## Touring the Prevention/Promotion Literature

The literature in prevention and promotion is expanding far more rapidly than any textbook will ever capture. Relevant literature comes from many fields, including the mass media and the Internet. Particularly for the latter outlets, it becomes important to know how to recognize high-quality work that is useful for prevention/promotion purposes.

The purpose of this exercise is to provide you with ways to do your own investigations of the literature so you can keep up to date and determine what it is that is worth studying in more detail. We invite you to look at a wide array of outlets for examples that reflect prevention and promotion. In addition to research journals, articles in major newspapers and newsmagazines regularly address the social issues that are the central concern of community psychology, although rarely will you see community psychology mentioned. One particular reason for reading them is our responsibilities as citizens to inform ourselves about those issues. Prevention and promotion are linked to areas that come up for public consideration in the media and in our legislative bodies. The prevention/promotion literature also can inform many college and university policies that impact considerably on students.

The analytic method we recommend is summarized below. It reflects our view that reviews of the literature, as well as students' reviewing of the literature, are best done in a particular context and for particular purposes. We find it is more valuable to read purposefully than generically. Our questions draw from concepts of community psychology, social ecology, and Bower's (1972) classic concept of Key Integrative Social Systems.

You may find that there are additional questions you want to add that are relevant to your particular interests. You might want to keep track of certain problem areas, make a separate file for work done in different parts of the United States and the world, or have a special focus on mass media and Internet sources or doings in your current community or hometown. You may find that initial sources you examine will not have the information you need to answer a number of the questions we suggest, and that you need to read further. Part of the participant–conceptualizer role of community psychologists is to shed light on knowledge needed for responsible citizenship.

### Guidelines for Reviewing Prevention/Promotion Articles/Materials

1. Record full reference information, to be sure you know the source and context of this work.
2. What is the purpose of the work? Does it discuss a community or social issue that could be addressed by prevention/promotion initiatives? Or does it report on a specific prevention/promotion intervention?
3. If a prevention/promotion intervention is described, what protective processes is the program trying to strengthen? What risk processes is the program trying to weaken?
4. What population is being focused on? How were particular participants chosen? Some criteria may include age, gender, race or ethnicity, socioeconomic status or class, urban/suburban/rural location or geographic area, nation, or historical /political/cultural context.
5. What Key Integrative Social System(s) is involved:  health care (includes prenatal/ birth/postnatal care), parents/families, peers, schools, religious settings, workplaces, leisure/recreational, community organizations, media/Internet/cyberspace, other?
6. What ecological level or levels of analysis does the article address? Individual, microsystems, organizations, localities, and/or macrosystems? What specific persons or groups does it address at that level? Is it targeted at the right level(s)?

7.  If a prevention/promotion intervention is described, does it respond to a planned or predictable life situation (such as an education-related transition) or to an unpredictable life event (a reaction to a stressful or crisis event, such as divorce, bereavement, unemployment)?
8.  Does the article focus on a wider community or social issue, such as poverty, social injustice, prejudice, or drugs? How might "small wins" thinking (Weick, 1984) be applicable in prevention/promotion efforts on that issue?
9.  If a prevention/promotion intervention was conducted, who planned it? How much were various constituencies and stakeholders involved? At what points? Were the persons most affected by decisions made in this program involved in making those decisions? Was there sufficient sensitivity to cultural and contextual factors?
10. How was the intervention implemented? Where? By whom? Under what conditions? When was it carried out? How often? Over what period of time? Did the program developers check to see if the program was actually implemented as planned?
11. What is the evidence for the effectiveness of the intervention? What are the sources of that evidence?
12. Which of the objectives were clearly met? Not met? Met partially? Did it have an impact on the wider community? How?
13. Was the intervention implemented in multiple settings or contexts? Was it effective in all settings?
14. Are you convinced that the authors' interpretations or claims of effectiveness are true? Why or why not?
15. What are the most important things you think can be learned from what you read? What important questions does it raise?

## References

Bower, E. (1972). Education as a humanizing process. In S. Golann & C. Eisdorfer (Eds.), *Handbook of community mental health* (pp. 37–50). New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

Weick, K. (1984). Small wins: Redefining the scale of social issues. *American Psychologist, 39,* 40–49.