

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT RESEARCH



Studies are important because they help us understand more about our communities, but they come with their own limitations too. Researcher and funder bias can influence which studies can happen in the first place and how any results are interpreted. To understand intersecting oppressions we need to draw on a range of sources both in and out of formal academic settings and be aware of the weak points in each approach.

When looking at a study some things to consider are:

Can you access the study itself?

If you're looking at a report, press release, or other place where someone else is summarising the study, you're assuming that they have critically evaluated the study. It's best to look at it yourself or have someone you trust with the relevant knowledge read it.

What's the sample size? If the study looks at a small group of people the results may be more coincidental than universal.

Who was included in the study?

If a study looks at a large group of people but only draws from one demographic then the results can only be applied to that demographic, e.g., a study on disabled people where all the participants are white and cisgender will miss any differences that might come up for trans disabled people or disabled people of colour.

Some studies that claim to be researching a particular community may tell you more about the people around that community than the community itself, e.g., a study on transgender children where researchers interview parents instead of the trans children themselves is really a study on the views of parents of trans kids, and not on trans kids directly.

How did the questions shape the answer?

Some questions will limit what possible responses people give or prompt people to give answers that are more in line with how the question is phrased. Always ask what assumptions a question is making.

Who was excluded?

Some studies deter some people from participating, e.g., if participants are asked to identify as 'lesbian, gay, or straight' a bi person might choose not to participate in the first place. That's fine if the study is intentionally only looking at lesbian, gay, and straight people, but if the researcher didn't realise who they were excluding they may think that their study is broader than it is and claim that it applies more widely.

Are there similar topics being discussed in non-academic spaces? Academic spaces are vital, but they're also harder to access for many marginalized people, and that means that some perspectives are excluded.

Are there other possible explanations?

A study might find that there are more young trans people today than 10 years ago and assume that something is causing more people to be transgender. But a better explanation is that as society has become safer and more informed, more trans people are able to come out at younger ages. Think carefully about whether there are other explanations for any data you see.