

What does “critical review” mean?

Basically, it means examining an argument/piece of research/opinion in terms of how it relates to what others have said on the subject. Most people believe what they read most of the time, without thinking about the big picture.

Let's take an easy example:

The Mercury newspaper published here in Hobart provides us with rich fodder for critical analysis. One of their favourite topics is binge drinking amongst young people. When you take a closer look at the actual news that is being reported, however, we find that most of the drinking culprits “nabbed” were older males who were also driving. This fact is supported by the data, easily accessible by a quick search on Google for crime statistics. But, it seems that targeting young people as “out of control” or a group to be feared when partying, sells more newspapers than reading about 40 somethings just popping out in the car when they’ve just popped a few beers.

So, what I am doing here is comparing the opinion of the article with the facts and finding other explanations for why Tasmania’s capital city newspaper seems to be trying to demonise young people. Newspapers are easy –

Now let's try something more difficult:

Consider some of the articles about the problem of the ageing population. Many of them assume that because chronic illness is more common in over 55s and requires more health care to manage it, the costs of health care are going to “blow out” as the people in the older demographic “bubble” reach retirement. This seems to make so much intuitive sense, that when you read these sort of reports, you immediately agree that we have a problem. The articles we have on the web page encourage you to think more critically about this proposition by presenting alternative views. For example, we know that Germany has had an ageing population for much longer than Australia and has managed to keep its costs below those of the US, for example, which has a much younger demographic. We know that ill health is strongly correlated with SES, lack of social support, negative self concept, isolation and loneliness. So instead of talking about “rationing” which the articles on ageing populations because of “escalating” health care costs inevitably get around to, we might think more about changing the conditions of old age in line with research that shows that chronic illness is not a given outcome of ageing. This is critically analysing an issue by comparing what one argument says against what others have argued, and possibly, what our own interpretation of the “facts” might be. (Caution to be exercised here, though, as you need to provide your own evidence to back up your conclusions.) If we wanted to go the whole hog with this issue, we might consider what critical social theory has to say about interest groups in health care and why it might be preferable to blame rising costs of health care on treating older people.

To summarise, then:

Critical analysis involves comparing and contrasting arguments on an issue and proposing conclusions based on evidence and/or theory.