

Study Questions: Pfau and Pinel, 1989

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Pfau and Pinel (1989) examined the effects of alcohol on sexual behavior. This hand-out provides some questions for your consideration while you read their paper.

As one reads any scientific article that reports the results of a study, one should read the paper actively. Active reading involves asking questions of the authors and of oneself as one reads. Contrast this with passive reading, in which the reader simply accepts the authors' statements and story-line without question — appropriate to the reading of novels and other works of fiction, but not to scientific articles. Herein I suggest sample questions that the reader should consider while reading Pfau and Pinel (1989). These questions should in most cases generalize readily to the reading of any empirical report.

Questions

1. What motivated the authors to conduct this particular study? Often the motivation is the realization that an important piece of information is not available; at other times it is the discovery of contradictory information in the literature.
2. What specific question or questions did the authors address?
3. What was known regarding this question prior to the authors' work?
4. What did the authors do?
 - What species was studied, and why?
 - Was there anything special about the animals' living situation outside of the experimental setting (or was a manipulation of the living situation a critical component of the experiment)?
 - If the study is an experiment, what independent variable was manipulated?
 - What was measured?
5. Briefly describe the results of the study.
6. If inferential statistics were used, did the authors use the proper statistical test or tests?
7. Were the authors' descriptions of the results consistent with the outcomes of the statistical tests?
8. What conclusions were drawn by the authors?
9. Were these conclusions consistent with the results?

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10. Did the authors control adequately for extraneous or confounding variables that might have biased the results?

11. Can the reader think of (or do the authors suggest) the obvious next study that should be conducted?

12. Have the authors told their story well? Is the writing clear and concise, are the figures and tables (if present) easily understood?

13. Does it appear that the authors have reviewed the literature thoroughly? If you are aware of a relevant study that was not included, or another study that addresses the same question considered by the authors, then the answer is probably "No."

Discussion

After reading a paper, one should be able to describe in a sentence or two what was done and what was found. This description should have two characteristics:

- it should provide a good summary without getting lost in details, and
- it should whet the appetite of the listener, making him/her want to learn more about the study.

Please be sure that you can do this for the Pfau and Pinel (1989) paper.

Reading the scientific literature is not always easy, but it should always be rewarding. From the beginning of the scientific revolution, papers published in scientific journals have been the source of much of our new knowledge about the world. A well-written paper describing a well-designed and well-conducted study should bring pleasure. A poorly-written paper might be painful to read, but it too will bring some pleasure if the study described is high quality. Even a poorly-written paper describing a bad study can be enjoyable for the reader who examines it critically and is capable of both discovering its flaws and redesigning the study to eliminate those flaws.

References

- Pfau, J. G., & Pinel, J. P. J. (1989). Alcohol inhibits and disinhibits sexual behavior in the male rat. *Psychobiology*, *17*, 195–201.