



Research Reading Guide of the Month
MARCH 2004

Locke, L.F. (2004).

A Little Skepticism Can Be a Healthy Thing.

You already know that you can't believe everything you are told (and only half of what you see). That same rule of caution applies to research with equal cogency. As we all sometimes do, researchers make mistakes and can fall into embarrassing traps for the unwary. That is why a degree of gentle skepticism can be a healthy thing to have about you when settling down to read a study of physical education.

That does not mean that it is useful to spend all your time watching for the slightest departure from perfect logic or pristine methodology. At least, on the first read through I find that listening to the story being told requires all of my attention. Having a bit of healthy skepticism also does not mean that you need to get all hung up over questions such as "Is this good research?" and "Was that the correct way to analyze the data?" While those are perfectly legitimate (and important) questions, it is worth remembering two rules about research quality – (1) some degree of trust has to be invested in the referees and editor(s) who screened the report, and (2) on the fine points of research procedure even the experts have difficulty making such qualitative judgments with perfect reliability. When you come upon something that seems problematic – by all means take notice and raise questions, but don't let that tie you into an intellectual knot.

Instead, I suggest that you just post a yellow flag next to anything that sets off your commonsense alarm. Then you can press on to the end, with findings (and interpretations) stored in memory under the heading of: "perhaps." Later opportunity to check out such caution flags with someone who can help evaluate the problem may allay your suspicions – or it may not. Just keep a few grains of skeptical salt handy, while remembering that you can learn a great deal without believing everything you read.

It also is true, however, that in reading research reports there is a thin line between gentle and healthy skepticism on the one hand, and destructive cynicism on the other. If you are going to find value in research, it is important to be on the right side of the skepticism/cynicism boundary – and that will be the topic for consideration in the next Reading Guide of the Month.

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