Instructional text for critical analysis no 1 (Krienert and Walsh)

# Summary

This example is based on a paper examining the national statistics from the USA on homicides of victims aged 60 or over (‘eldercides’). The first part of the exercise entails completing a Critical Analysis, focused on a rather specific review question, to which the paper is only partly relevant. Our own completed Critical Analysis (using the template) is provided for reference, along with a brief commentary on how the review question determines the responses on the form.

The next part of the exercise entails re-examining just the results section of the paper, in the light of two different review questions, in turn. This activity shows how focusing ones’ reading provides exactly the material one requires, while avoiding unnecessary engagement with details that are not relevant to one’s present interests and priorities.

# Part one instructions

Read the paper by Krienert and Walsh, and complete the Critical Analysis using the template, to answer the review question ‘What are the risk factors associated with violence to elderly females in residential care homes in [your country]?’ Keep in mind the need to make your responses to Critical Analysis Question 3 specific to this review question.

## Commentary on part 1

Now compare your completed Critical Analysis with ours. You should not expect them to be identical. Critical Analysis involves the reader’s *interpretation* of the claims and evidence. Because we are all different, we will often make different judgements about what we read.

In our form, the review question reads ‘…in the United Kingdom’ because that is where we are based. Your review question may be different in this regard. (If you are based in the United States, your engagement with the data in the paper is one step closer than if you are based, like us, outside.)

We shall focus here on the responses to the Critical Analysis Questions most directly affected by the choice of review question:

 Critical Analysis Question 1 (identifying the review question driving the analysis);

 Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-question *b* (focusing on the content of the relevant knowledge claims and the overall argument);

 Critical Analysis Question 10, sub-question *a* (judging how convincing the authors’ claims are that relate to answering the review question).

### *Critical analysis question 1: What review question am I asking of this text?*

Note how we took the opportunity to be explicit about what we felt the paper would and would not be useful for. You might find this approach helpful too, because your ideas may change over the course of doing a lot of reading. Unless you leave an explicit account of what was on your mind when you read this paper, you may not remember later what your priorities were. You may be re-reading this section of your Critical Analysis a year or more after you wrote it, and your ideas may have moved on in the meantime. Also note the final comment under this response, regarding the absence of separate data on residential homes. Clearly, we could not have written this before we read the paper. In fact, we went back and added it when we noticed it in the account and realized its importance. The template does not have to be filled in linearly – it is fine to move up and down, adding information wherever it best belongs, as you come across it.

### *Critical analysis question 3: sub-question b (focusing on the authors’ claims that are relevant to the review question)*

Our response about the main claims and overall argument is not, it can be seen, a simple reproduction of the key findings in the text (compare how they are presented on page 63 onwards). A typical weakness in dissertations is that the literature review section gets over-long and under-focused, because it simply summarizes each study, leaving it to the reader to figure out which aspects of the information are actually relevant. Of course it can sometimes be appropriate to provide a straight summary. But it should only be done after careful consideration because, done unnecessarily, it is wasteful of words, detracts from your story, and tempts you into being more descriptive than critical. The purpose of the Critical Analysis is to help you muster evidence from many different sources, so it can be compared and discussed in ways relevant to your own review questions. So the more you write specifically to topic, the better. In the second part of this exercise, we will revisit this sub-question and response, to see how a different review question impacts on what is reported in this part of a Critical Analysis.

Notice that we listed more than the 3-5 key findings suggested in the template. This was because the findings in this study were very specific, and it would be difficult to provide a more general summary of them. The template is there for you to use and adapt in the most effective way for your purposes, so it is not a problem to do something slightly different from what is suggested. However, remember that writing more means you have more to read later. There is a useful discipline in capturing the essence of a paper in just a few words, so do not give up on that too easily!

You will also see that we added a comment in brackets to one finding, regarding the possibility that there may be more women in the 80+ age bracket relative to men, since women live longer than men,. This is simply an idea that occurred to us when recording the finding. By putting it in square brackets we remind ourselves that it is not something we read in the text. Where you have a thought about what might explain a finding, or potentially challenge a claim, it is useful to note it down so you can think more about it later, and check out whether it is likely to be a valid addition to your discussion.

### *Critical analysis question 10, sub-section a ((judging how convincing the authors’ claims are that relate to answering the review question)*

Here we wrote down our summary judgement, in the light of the detailed evaluation of the claims we previously identified (in our response to Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-question *a*) as being most relevant to answering the review question. This is where you are likely to look, when you return to your completed Critical Analyses, to see how this text is going to fit into your comparative literature review. As with all the other parts of the template, what you put here depends on what you feel will be most useful to you later.

# Part two instructions

First, in order to examine how different review questions affect the way one completes the form, you should now turn to the *Participants* (p.60-61) and *Results* (p.63 onwards) sections of Krienert and Walsh’s paper, and answer Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-question *b* again. This time address the review question: ‘*Do black males have an undeserved reputation for violence?*’ (Avoid looking at our commentary until later).

Second, (before looking at our version of the response using the review question above), have another go at answering Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-question *b*, now addressing the following review question: ‘*Should elderly people be provided with security equipment in their homes, to help keep them safe?*’

Third, read below our response to Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-question *b*, for each review question in turn, then read our commentary.

## Commentary on part 2

These are our responses to Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-question *b*, when each of the two new review questions was used. Your own responses may be different, depending on your judgements about what the main claims and overall argument are that relate to each of these review questions.

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| **My Review Question is: Do black males have an undeserved reputation for violence?**The main claims relevant to this review question are:i) Males are five times more likely than females to commit eldercide (Table 1, p. 61)ii) Eldercide offenders are more than twice as likely to be white as black (Table 1, p. 61) |

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| **My Review Question is: Should elderly people be provided with security equipment in their homes, to help keep them safe?**The main claims relevant to this review question are:i) Most eldercides occur in the victim’s residence (Table 5, p.65)ii) A significant proportion of eldercides are committed by relatives [who may have legitimate access to the victim’s residence] (Table 3, p.63, Table 4, p.64)iii) There are male-female differences in relation to several variables that would require different targeting of protection, including the age of the offender, relationship to the victim, role of alcohol and use of a gun (p.67) |

Bear in mind that when there is a different review question, other Critical Analysis Questions would also be answered differently. Clearly the responses to Critical Analysis Question 1 and Critical Analysis 10, sub-question *a* would be different because that is where the review question is explicitly referred to. But so also might some elements of other responses. However, we wanted to explore the major impact of different review questions, and for that reason have focused here on Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-section *b*.

### *First response, driven by the review question: Do black males have an undeserved reputation for violence?*

1. The information provided in answer to Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-question *b* is likely to be different in each case. This demonstrates the power of focusing, in your reading, on precisely what you need to know. That is, what you harvest from a paper should depend on what you need.

2. There is an error in Table 3 of Krienert & Walsh’s paper. The first value in the row ‘Offender race, black’ should read 123, not 13. The right value can be worked out using the percentages, which are correct. We checked by e-mail with the first author of the paper, who confirmed that this was a typographical error. It would not be helpful to engage in ‘criticism’ of such an error in your review, since errors can creep in during production, however careful the author is about checking the pre-publication proofs. The main issue is being alert enough, when reading, to notice when a figure is odd, and taking some steps to ensure you know the correct value. You might mention the correction of an error in a footnote in your review if your readers would be likely to find it useful. The first author also clarified to us why the N values in the legends of Tables 3, 4 and 5 do not match the totals on the columns beneath. It is because of missing information in the original datasets. The same applies to the failure of the figures within the sub-groups of the tables to add up to the values at the top of the columns. For instance, only 355 cases are mentioned for offender age x male victim, rather than the 476 at the top of the column, because the age of the offender was not always provided in the database.

You might wonder whether it is acceptable practice to contact the author of a paper to ask this kind of question. The answer yes, though it is advisable to reread the paper first, and also talk through your questions with someone else, in case there is a more obvious answer. That way, you can avoid bothering an author unnecessarily.

3. It is not possible fully to answer either of the review questions addressed here using only the evidence in the paper. This does not matter, because a review question is used to examine several different papers, and the answer to the review question is derived from the combined information. So here, in addressing the question ‘Do black males have an undeserved reputation for violence?’, the answer to Critical Analysis Question 3, sub-question *b* simply lists information that we might draw on later, as part of a discussion of many lines of evidence, in gradually developing an answer to that question.

4. Sometimes it is possible to derive additional information from a text that is not directly given. For example, Table 3 shows that 80% of eldercide offenders are male and that 42% are black. This would permit a calculation: of the 194 black offenders mentioned in Table 3, 80% (= 155) were probably male. We can only say ‘probably’ because this calculation assumes that the distribution of males to females is the same for black and white offenders, which might not be the case. Similarly, we might want to compare the figures for black offenders given in the paper with official statistics for the proportion of black people in the US population. If the proportion of black offenders mentioned in this paper on eldercide was lower than the proportion of black people in the general population, it would be possible to propose that black people were less likely than white people to commit eldercide, offering a partial answer to the review question about an unjustified reputation for violence. Again, we cannot derive this information directly from the paper, and any such calculation would have to be undertaken and reported extremely cautiously.

### *Second response, driven by the review question: Should elderly people be provided with security equipment in their homes, to help keep them safe?*

1. Turning to the second review question, the text does not provide any direct information at all about whether or not the elderly should have more security equipment at home. As reviewers, our job was to look out for any information that might be used to help with warranting our own claims about the answer to that question – clearly this text is only of peripheral help, relative to one reporting a study of the effect on crime figures of installing security equipment in elderly people’s homes.

2. However, the text may still make a useful contribution to a literature review driven by this review question. It can prove productive to make an *indirect* link with selected findings, rather than a direct one. Here, answering the review question might entail weighing up how significant the risk of eldercide is to elderly people’s safety (compared with other kinds of risk, such as falling), and so whether particular forms of security equipment might be worth installing to reduce this risk. Various findings from Krienert and Walsh’s study could productively inform such consideration, for example, findings about:

 The prevalence of eldercide in the USA could offer some indication of the relative significance of this risk, compared to others;

 The proportion of perpetrators who are relatives of the victim (some of whom might have access to the victim’s residence), and the likelihood of eldercide occurring inside the victim’s residence, could inform thinking about what form of security installation might minimize the eldercide risk.