

Your Psychology Project

Your Psychology Project

The Essential Guide

Jennifer Evans



© Jennifer Evans

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BRIEF CONTENTS

Pref Ack	ace nowledgements	xx xxii
UN	IT 1 SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS	1
1	The Psychology Project as a Means of Acquiring Knowledge	5
2	Ethics for Research in Psychology	10
3	Choosing a Topic and the Research Proposal	21
4	A Connected and Convincing Argument	35
5	Self-Management	42
6	Maximising Supervision	52
7	How to Handle the Research Literature	57
8	How to Write a Good Introduction	68
9	Sampling Considerations	79
10	Sourcing Materials and Measures for Psychological Research	85
UN	IT 2 QUANTITATIVE METHODS OF INQUIRY	97
11	Quantitative Methods of Inquiry	101
12	Analysing Quantitative Data	115
13	Designing and Conducting an Experimental Research Project	136
14	Writing Up your Quantitative Methodology	145
15	Writing Up your Quantitative Results Section	153
16	Writing Up your Quantitative Discussion Section	160

UN.	IT 3 Q	UALITATIVE METHODS OF INQUIRY	169
17	Qualita	tive Methods of Inquiry	171
18	Qualita	tive Data Analysis	175
19		mi-Structured Interview as Part of led Theory	186
20	_	ng, Conducting and Analysing a led Theory Project	193
21	Writing	Up your Qualitative Methodology	205
22	Writing	Up your Qualitative Findings and Discussion	211
UN	IT 4 TH	HE FINAL TOUCHES	219
23	Title an	ad Abstract	221
24	Referen	aces	231
25	The Fin	aal Write-Up	239
App	endix A	Students' personal experiences of their	
Apr	endix B	psychology project Carrying out common statistical analyses	247
1 1 P F	CHGIA D	using SPSS V14	250
Refe	erences		255
Inde	ŻΧ		262

	eface knowledgements	xx xxii
Uľ	NIT 1 SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS	1
Int	roduction	1
1	The Psychology Project as a Means of Acquiring Knowledge	5
	Objectives	5
	Overview	5
	1.1 What is the Purpose of Science for Psychology?	5
	1.2 The Psychology Project as a Means of	
	Acquiring Knowledge	6
	1.3 Quantitative and Qualitative Methods of Inquiry	7
	1.4 How to Choose the Appropriate Method of Inquiry:	
	Quantitative or Qualitative?	8
	Summary	9
	Further Reading	9
2	Ethics for Research in Psychology	10
	Objectives	10
	Overview	10
	2.1 Shared Moral Framework	11
	2.2 Ethical Considerations in Psychological Research	12
	Planning the study	12
	Status and welfare of participants	15
	Interpretation of research	18
	2.3 A Note on Ethics in Qualitative Research	19
	Summary	20
	Further Reading	20
3	Choosing a Topic and the Research Proposal	21
	Objectives	21
	Overview	21

3.1 Choosing a Topic	22
Simple strategies for evaluating potential research topics	22
3.2 How to Formulate a Good Research Question	24
Idea generating	24
Using the research literature to generate ideas	25
3.3 Clarifying and Refining your Research Question	26
Different types of research questions	27
Evaluating your research question	28
3.4 The Role of the Research Proposal	28
An exercise in thought	28
Starting point for supervision	29
Motivational device	29
3.5 The Research Proposal Deconstructed	29
1. Statement of the research problem	29
2. Introduction – Literature review	30
3. Methodology	31
4. Discussion of potential findings	32
5. Ethical considerations	32
3.6 A Note on Writing Style	32
3.7 Common Pitfalls	33
3.8 Checklist	33
Summary	34
Further Reading	34
A Connected and Convincing Argument	35
Objectives	35
Overview	35
4.1 A Connected and Convincing Argument	35
4.2 Clear Communication and Effective Writing	36
1. Economy of expression	36
2. Precision	37
3. Adherence to grammatical rules	37
4.3 Some Tips for Scientific Writing	37
1. The paragraph	37
2. Transitional devices	38
3. The proper tense, correct person and voice	38
4. Numbers in the text	39
5. Abbreviations	40
6. Over-reliance on specific terminology	40
4.4 Implicit Assumptions	40
Summary	41
Further Reading	41

5	Self-Management	42
	Objectives	42
	Overview	42
	5.1 Motivational Strategies	43
	Activity 1 – Planning: Setting goals	44
	Activity 2 – Self-monitoring	45
	Activity 3 – Self-evaluation and reflection	46
	5.2 Time Management	47
	5.3 Avoiding Procrastination	49
	1. Deconstruct the task	49
	2. Carry out related tasks	50
	5.4 Ways to Overcome Writer's Block	50
	5.5 Promoting a Positive Attitude	50
	5.6 Checklist	51
	Summary	51
	Further Reading	51
6	Maximising Supervision	52
	Objectives	52
	Overview	52
	6.1 Establishing the Student-Supervisor Relationship	53
	6.2 Practical Approaches to Maximising Feedback	54
	Summary	55
	Further Reading	56
7	How to Handle the Research Literature	57
	Objectives	57
	Overview	57
	7.1 The Role of the Research Literature	58
	7.2 Where to Search for Literature	59
	7.3 A Note on Internet-Based Information	63
	7.4 How to Critically Review the Research Literature	63
	7.5 Organising the Literature that you have Reviewed	66
	Summary	67
	Further Reading	67
8	How to Write a Good Introduction	68
	8.1 Writing a Good Introduction	69
	8.2 Strategies to Highlight the Importance of your Study	72
	8.3 Stating your Research Question and Hypothesis	74
	8.4 Common Pitfalls	76
	8.5 Checklist	77

	Summary	77
	Further Reading	78
9	Sampling Considerations	79
	Objectives	79
	Overview	79
	9.1 Sampling Considerations	79
	9.2 Probability Sampling	80
	1. Simple random sampling	80
	2. Stratified random sampling	80
	3. Systematic random sampling	81
	4. Cluster random sampling	81
	9.3 Non-Probability sampling	81
	1. Purposive sampling	82
	2. Theoretical sampling	82
	3. Convenience sampling	82
	4. Quota sampling	83
	5. Snowball sampling	84
	Summary	84
	Further Reading	84
10	Sourcing Materials and Measures for Psychological Research	85
	Objectives	85
	Overview	85
	10.1 Sourcing Materials and Measurements	86
	Published tests and measures	86
	Unpublished tests and measures	88
	10.2 Sourcing Psychology Apparatus	89
	10.3 Ethics for Test Users	90
	10.4 Evaluating Measures	90
	Reliability	91
	Validity	93
	Summary	95
	Further Reading	95
UN	IIT 2 QUANTITATIVE METHODS OF INQUIRY	97
Intr	roduction	97
11	Quantitative Methods of Inquiry	101
	Objectives	101
	Overview	101
	11.1 Characteristics of Quantitative Methods of Inquiry	102
	11.2 A Model of the Quantitative Research Process	102

	Phase 1: Idea-generating and specification of the research	
	problem (introduction)	103
	Phase 2: Designing and conducting your study	
	(methodology)	104
	Phase 3: Data-analysis (results)	104
	Phase 4: Interpretation (discussion)	105
	Phase 5: Communication (write-up)	105
	11.3 Experimental Methods of Inquiry	105
	The logic of experimental design	105
	Internal and external validity	107
	Experimental designs	107
	Quasi-experimental designs	110
	11.4 Non-Experimental Methods of Inquiry	110
	Survey Research	110
	Correlational and Differential Research	111
	11.5 Conceptualisation to Operationalisation	111
	11.6 Theory of Measurement	112
	Discrete variables	113
	Continuous variables	114
	Summary	114
	Further Reading	114
12	Analysing Quantitative Data	115
	Objectives	115
	Overview	115
	12.1 Quantitative Data Analysis	116
	12.2 Hypothesis Testing as a Means of Answering your Research	
	Question using SPSS V14	117
	12.3 Step 1: State your Hypothesis	118
	12.4 Step 2: Exploratory Data Analysis and Testing for Normality	119
	Tests of normality and transformations	120
	Some warnings regarding the use of data transformations	125
	Suggestions for good practice	125
	12.5 Step 3: Run Appropriate Inferential Test, including	
	Descriptives, Confidence Intervals, Effect Size and Power	125
	12.6 Step 4: Make Sense of your Results	126
	Interpreting P value	128
	Effect size	128
	Power	131
	12.7 Results that are Highly Significant and Near Misses	132
	12.8 The Meaning of Significant Results	133
	12.9 A Warning about Statistical Packages and Reading	
	SPSS Outputs	133

	Summary	134
	Further Reading	134
13	Designing and Conducting an Experimental Research Project	136
	Objectives	136
	Overview	136
	13.1 The Importance of the Research Question	137
	13.2 The Importance of Planning and Designing your Study	138
	Decision 1: Operationalising your variables	138
	Decision 2: Who will your participants be?	138
	Decision 3: What sampling technique to use?	140
	Decision 4: How to assign participants to answer your	
	research question	140
	Decision 5: What type of data will you collect?	140
	Decision 6: Representativness, sample size, power and	
	statistical analysis	141
	Decision 7: Ethical considerations	142
	13.3 Conducting Your Study	142
	13.4 Pilot Study	143
	13.5 Checklist	143
	Summary	143
	Further Reading	144
14	Writing Up your Quantitative Methodology	145
	Objectives	145
	Overview	145
	14.1 Writing up the Methodology	146
	14.2 Design Subsection	146
	14.3 Participants Subsection	148
	14.4 Materials Subsection	149
	14.5 Procedure Subsection	151
	14.6 Data Management Subsection	151
	14.7 Checklist	151
	Summary	152
	Further Reading	152
15	Writing Up your Quantitative Results Section	153
	Objectives	153
	Overview	153
	15.1 Structure of the Results Section	153
	15.2 Review of Aims and Hypotheses	154
	15.3 Summary of Data: Descriptive Statistics	155

	15.4 Testing Hypotheses: Inferential Statistics	157
	Statistical presentation of results	157
	15.5 Conclusions	157
	15.6 Presenting Tables and Graphs	157
	15.7 Guidelines for Writing Up your Results Section	158
	15.8 Checklist	158
	Summary	158
	Further Reading	159
16	Writing Up your Quantitative Discussion Section	160
	Objectives	160
	Overview	160
	16.1 What the Discussion Contains	161
	Restatement of essential findings	162
	Assess the quality of your study and consider	
	methodological flaws	162
	Theoretical implications	164
	Careful consideration of findings that fail to support	
	your research question	164
	Careful consideration of rival explanations of your findings	165
	Practical applications of your study	165
	Directions for future research	166
	Conclusions of your study	167
	16.2 Checklist	167
	Summary	167
	Further Reading	168
UN	IIT 3 QUALITATIVE METHODS OF INQUIRY	169
Inti	roduction	169
17	Qualitative Methods of Inquiry	171
	Objectives	171
	Overview	171
	17.1 Characteristics of Qualitative Methods of Inquiry	171
	17.2 Qualitative Methods of Data Collection	172
	The interview	173
	Observation	173
	Participatory action research	173
	Qualitative case study	174
	Summary	174
	Further Reading	174

18	Qualitative Data Analysis	175
	Objectives	175
	Overview	175
	18.1 Coding	176
	18.2 Conceptualisation in Qualitative Data Analysis	177
	18.3 Memoing	177
	18.4 Generating Meaning	178
	18.5 Cognitive Processes Involved	178
	18.6 Reflexivity	179
	18.7 Approaches to Qualitative Data Analysis	179
	Grounded theory	180
	Ethnomethodology/conversational analysis	180
	Discourse analysis	180
	Interpretative phenomenological analysis	181
	Protocol analysis	181
	18.8 Evaluating Qualitative Data Analysis	181
	Reliability	182
	Validity	182
	Summary	184
	Further Reading	185
19	The Semi-Structured Interview as Part of Grounded Theory	186
	Objectives	186
	Overview	186
	19.1 The Interview as a Method of Data Collection	186
	19.2 Designing an Interview-Based Study	187
	Recruiting participants	187
	Constructing your interview guide	188
	How questions are asked	188
	How long should each interview be?	189
	19.3 Conducting the Interview	190
	Pilot work and practical issues	190
	Technical issues	190
	19.4 Transcribing	191
	19.5 A Note on Reflexivity	191
	Summary	192
	Further Reading	192
20	Designing, Conducting and Analysing a Grounded	
	Theory Project	193
	Objectives	193
	Overview	193

	20.1 Grounded Theory	194
	20.2 Sampling, Data Collection and Data Analysis: A Simultaneous	
	Process	195
	20.3 Coding	197
	Line-by-line open coding	197
	Axial coding	200
	Selective coding	201
	20.4 Memo Writing	202
	20.5 Reflexivity	203
	Summary	203
	Further Reading	204
21	Writing Up your Qualitative Methodology	205
	Objectives	205
	Overview	205
	21.1 Writing up the Methodology	205
	21.2 Theoretical Background	206
	21.3 Setting Subsection	207
	21.4 Participants Subsection	208
	21.5 Measures and Apparatus Subsection	208
	21.6 Procedure Subsection	209
	21.7 Analytical Strategy	209
	21.8 Checklist	210
	Summary	210
	Further Reading	210
22	Writing Up your Qualitative Findings/Discussion	211
	Objectives	211
	Overview	211
	21.1 Qualitative Findings/Discussion Section	211
	22.2 What to Include?	212
	Use of quotes	213
	Discuss findings in relation to previous research and theory	213
	Methodological flaws	214
	Practical implications	214
	Directions for future research	215
	Reflexive analysis	216
	Conclusion	216
	22.3 A Note on Style	216
	22.4.Checklist	217
	Summary	217
	Further Reading	217

UNIT 4 THE FINAL TOUCHES	219
Introduction	219
23 Title and Abstract	221
Objectives	221
Overview	221
23.1 Purpose of the Title and Abstract	222
23.2 The Title	222
1. Declarative title	223
2. Descriptive title	224
3. Functional title	224
4. Title of effect or influence	224
5. Role title	225
6. Question title	225
7. Catchy title	225
8. Correlational title	226
23.3 Guidelines for Devising a Good Title	226
23.4 The Abstract	227
Format	228
23.5 A Note on the Qualitative Abstract	229
23.6 A note on the Structured Abstract	229
23.7 Guidelines for Writing a Good Abstract	229
23.8 Common Pitfalls in Writing the Abstract	230
Summary	230
Further Reading	230
24 Referencing	231
Objectives	231
Overview	231
24.1 The Reference Section	231
1. Journal article	232
2. Book	232
3. Conference presentation	232
4. Technical report	233
5. Secondary source	234
6. Web-based	234
7. Software and apparatus	235
24.2 Citing References in the Text	235
Citing a single work by one author	235
Citing a single work by more than one auth	nor 236
Citing multiple studies	236
24.3 Quotations in the Text	236
24.4 Tips on Keeping Track of your References	237

Further Reading 25 The Final Write-Up Objectives Overview 25.1 General Format Paper Typeface	238 239 239
Objectives Overview 25.1 General Format Paper	
Objectives Overview 25.1 General Format Paper	
Overview 25.1 General Format Paper	233
25.1 General Format Paper	239
Paper	239
<u> </u>	239
Typerace	240
Margins and line spacing	240
Project submission	240
25.2 The Front Matter	240
1. Front cover	241
2. Title page	241
3. Copyright notice	242
4. Declaration	242
5. Acknowledgements	243
6. Abstract	243
7. Table of contents	243
25.3 Body of the Project	243
25.4 Back Matter	245
25.5 Editing and Reviewing your Project	245
Summary	246
Further Reading	246
Appendix A Students' Personal Experiences of their	
Psychology Project	247
Appendix B Carrying Out Common Statistical Analyses	
Using SPSS V14	250
References	255
Index	262

PREFACE

This book aims to give undergraduate psychology students clear guidelines in writing their psychology project, from both quantitative and qualitative paradigms. Students often complain of the need for practical examples in order to master the skill of writing a project successfully. This book aims to very clearly map out the requirements of a project in psychology, and to illustrate ways to meet these aims.

Many of my students come for their first supervision meetings with one major question: does their research question meet the requirements of a good project; is it good enough? In my experience, students are often unable to make the connections with the theoretical application of the requirements of a good project, for example addressing a significant psychological phenomenon, and making clear the relevance to the advancement of psychological knowledge, or offering reasonable interpretations of the research results with reference to the existing psychological literature. Students often find this requirement difficult to address; they find it abstract and do not know where to begin. In theory they understand these concepts, but are unable to apply them to their project idea. This book demonstrates, with the use of practical examples, how this can be accomplished.

This book also aims to equip students with the knowledge, skills and abilities to carry out and write up their projects. The book in essence acts as a survival manual or guide, and covers all areas of a psychology project, from conception of an idea, to writing up the final draft. This book not only guides students through examples illustrating how to do things right, but also how to do the right things. Psychology is often referred to as primary training in thought, in how to think critically about concepts and constructs, but also in how to think creatively and innovatively. It is through this capacity to be innovative that the psychology knowledge base advances.

This text focuses on the fundamental aspect of a successful project, which is the role of the research question. The research question or hypothesis governs the appropriateness of the method of inquiry, and hence the appropriate analytical procedures, that will be utilised to answer the research question posed. Students often fail to see this pertinent relationship at the early stages of the project, which can cause difficulties later on in the process. The book

will also deal with the thoughts involved in thinking through the whole research process, in order to create a seamless piece of work.

The final year project is often referred to as a thesis or dissertation; this is generally due to the fact that students carrying out a quantitative research project are required to make an argument and then try and prove it. For a long time, this was the norm, as quantitative research dominated psychology. However, with the changing nature of research within psychology, the term 'thesis' (or 'dissertation') no longer covers the range of research projects that undergraduate psychology students undertake in their final year. For example, qualitative research of an exploratory nature does not make assumptions and arguments from the onset; rather theory is generated following data collection. Therefore the term 'project' is more descriptive of the range of research that undergraduate students undertake in their final year as part of their degree.

Suggestions for further reading

To detail every method of inquiry that could be used for your psychology project is beyond the scope of this book. The essentials and main ideas behind different types of research for your project are presented. Suggestions for further reading are given at the end of each chapter so that you can delve further into specific areas that are important for your own project.

The book does not go through the basics of setting up new project files in NVivo or data files in SPSS. This text makes the assumption that, as final year students, you already have a working knowledge of these applications, but don't worry if you haven't – you will be directed towards relevant further reading.

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Finally I would like to thank my parents Myles and Dolores, and my husband Matthew, whose support is always unconditional. I would also like to thank my grandparents for financially supporting me when I first started my own primary degree in psychology. And a special thank you to Polly, for sitting by my feet during the write-up of this text; I owe her hundreds of walks.

UNIT 1

SETTING YOURSELF UP FOR SUCCESS

Introduction

Generally, students of psychology are required to undertake a project in the final year of their degree. This is often a daunting task, using existing knowledge gained throughout the degree usually with minimal supervision. Therefore the successful completion of the psychology project is often the most challenging academic requirement a student will face during their undergraduate degree. The process involves creativity and innovation, critical thinking, persistence, discipline, independence, and also feelings of uneasiness and insecurity. The good news is that it is possible to approach your final year psychology project with an attitude of confidence, and positive, forward thinking as opposed to anxiety and apprehension.

It is comforting to learn that those students who are most successful in completing their psychology projects are those who have set themselves up for success. These are the students who have put the appropriate structures in place, to aid them during the research process. *Unit 1: Setting Yourself Up for Success* makes it possible for every student to learn how to carefully plan, and lay down, solid and realistic foundations to facilitate successful completion of their research project.

Chapter 1 of this essential guide, *The Psychology Project as a Means of Acquiring Knowledge*, begins by broadly dealing with psychology as a scientific discipline and demonstrates that the essence of science is described as a way of thinking, the systematic logic used in asking and answering questions, and producing more knowledge. The role of the research project is therefore a means of inquiry; through formulating questions and finding answers to them, students add to the knowledge base.

Chapter 2 entitled *Ethics for Research in Psychology* deals with the crucial issue of ethics in psychological research, in the planning, execution and reporting of both quantitative and qualitative research. The chapter also highlights the codes of ethics, laid down by a number of major professional bodies, to act as a shared moral framework for making ethical decisions.

Chapter 3, Choosing a Topic and the Research Proposal, deals with the practicalities of evaluating topics from your potential list of topics, in order to choose the most appropriate one. The chapter also focuses on how to formulate a good research question, and the role of creativity and innovation. The functional importance of the research proposal is also highlighted, which is often neglected by undergraduate students.

Chapter 4, A Connected and Convincing Argument, deals with the appropriate style for writing your research project, and describes the importance of your project delivering a convincing and connected argument with an inherent logical structure, in order to produce a seamless piece of work. The importance of clear communication and effective writing is highlighted, and some tips for scientific writing are provided.

Chapter 5, Self-Management, deals with the important skills and metacompetencies that can be developed by students in order to successfully endure the research process, from the conception of an original idea to the final writeup of the psychology project. These foundation chapters demonstrate that completing your project is very much a personal endeavour involving the whole person. Chapter 5 addresses important aspects of self-regulation, as a way of scheduling, being organised, timetabled and self-managed. The importance of goal setting, and the role of short-term wins are highlighted as successful motivational strategies. Building on the theme of self-regulation, different time-management techniques, and strategies for overcoming procrastination are demonstrated. Emphasis is also placed on the role of self-management as a very effective mechanism for managing the stress or anxiety of the undergraduate psychology project, for example setting realistic short-term goals and priorities to help reduce anxiety and create a sense of control and accomplishment. Ways to overcome writer's block are also included, and the importance of tailoring a system of strategies that meets individual needs will be highlighted throughout.

Chapter 6, *Maximising Supervision*, deals with this often-neglected area. Students often under-estimate the valuable resource that supervision is. This chapter deals with how to maximise the benefits of supervision, by focusing on the establishment of the student–supervisor relationship, and on practical approaches to maximising feedback.

Chapter 7, How to Handle the Research Literature, deals with ways of handling the research literature, from sources of the literature to evaluating it. The role of the research literature for psychology as a science, and the importance of reading academic journals as opposed to popular journals that may not adhere to scientific rigour are highlighted. Students are often intimidated by the vastness of the research literature in psychology and the related social sciences, so some of the major sources of the academic literature are provided, in order to give the student some visibility in the literature fog. The main journals in psychology are also dealt with, along with the major electronic

databases that are available. Some tips are also given for using the search engines of the major electronic databases. Finally, the chapter illustrates useful ways to organise the literature you have reviewed, in order to use time as effectively as possible.

Chapter 8, How to Write a Good Introduction, deals with the introduction chapter of your psychology project. It highlights how writing the literature review comprises science and art. This section also deals with practical issues, such as what to include, and how long the literature review should be. It is demonstrated that length should not be used as a substitute for tight organisation and clear writing. Advice from Sternberg (2003) regarding the importance of reliability, validity and internal consistency in the literature review is also given. The chapter also presents five useful strategies to highlight the importance of your study, and focuses on the importance of making your hypotheses very explicit at the end of the introduction.

Chapter 9, Sampling Considerations, this brief chapter deals with the important issue of sampling for your research project. Sampling issues are important for both quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry, but they are considered at different times during the research process. For example, in qualitative research they are generally most important during the simultaneous data analysis and data-collection phase, while in quantitative research they are most important during the planning and design stage of the research process. Some popular probability and non-probability techniques are also illustrated.

Chapter 10, entitled Sourcing Materials and Measures for Psychological Research, provides useful information on how to source both published and unpublished tests and measures, and therefore to save valuable time for the undergraduate researcher of psychology. The chapter also deals with the very important issue of ethics for test users. Issues of reliability and validity are also dealt with in an attempt to aid the undergraduate student in becoming an objective and knowledgeable consumer of the vast number of psychological materials and measures that are available.

THE PSYCHOLOGY PROJECT AS A MEANS OF ACQUIRING KNOWLEDGE

Objectives

On reading this chapter you should:

- understand how psychology operates as a scientific discipline;
- understand the role of the undergraduate psychology project as a means of acquiring knowledge; and
- be aware of the usefulness of viewing qualitative and quantitative research situations as opposite ends of a continuum, as opposed to two distinctly separate approaches to inquiry.

Overview

Section 1.1 deals broadly with how psychology operates as a scientific discipline, and demonstrates how science can be viewed as a way of thinking (which involves asking and answering questions) and to produce more knowledge. Section 1.2 goes on to consider the psychology project as a means of acquiring knowledge. Section 1.3 deals with acquiring knowledge in psychology both quantitatively and qualitatively – it is proposed that it is useful to view the two approaches as research situations on opposite ends of a continuum, as opposed to two distinct approaches to research and inquiry within psychology. Finally Section 1.4 gives a brief overview of the importance of your research question in choosing a quantitative or qualitative method of inquiry.

1.1 What is the Purpose of Science for Psychology?

Often when people think of the word 'science', the first image that comes to mind is one of test tubes, computers and people in white laboratory coats. Some sciences, such as physics and chemistry, deal with the physical and material world, for example with chemicals and electricity. These natural sciences or hard sciences are generally the basis of new technology, and therefore receive a lot of publicity.

The social and behavioural sciences, such as psychology, sociology and anthropology, involve the study of people, including their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours. People do not always associate these disciplines with the word science, and are sometimes referred to as 'soft sciences'. The reference to soft does not mean that these disciplines lack scientific rigour or that they are sloppy or limp; it refers to their subject matter. Human behaviour and social life are far more fluid and transient than the tangible composites of chemistry and physics. However, the natural sciences are not made more scientific than psychology by virtue of their laboratory equipment. It is important to note that although many processes of inquiry produce scientific tools and products, it is the process of inquiry or way of thinking that encapsulates the essence of science.

The essence of science is this way of thinking. Science therefore encompasses a process of formulating specific questions, and finding answers to these questions, in order to gain a better understanding of phenomenon. These gains in our understanding produce and increase our knowledge base. This is reiterated by Chalmers' (1990) statement that science aims to produce knowledge of the world. Therefore, scientific research in psychology involves posing a question and then initiating a systematic process to obtain valid answers to that question. This process is carried out utilising the scientific method, which serves the basis for scientific inquiry. The overall goal of psychology as a science is to understand behaviour and phenomenon. Using the scientific method, understanding comprises four important goals of being able to describe, predict, understand and control behaviour or phenomena.

1.2 The Psychology Project as a Means of Acquiring Knowledge

The psychology project is an integral component of the undergraduate student's curriculum. Psychology departments continue this long tradition of inquiry, through the requirement of the final year project. The role of the research project is therefore a means of inquiry; through formulating questions and finding answers to them, students add to their knowledge base. Figure 1.1 depicts the cyclical recursive nature of the research process, and reflects the thinking process whereby new information results in new knowledge and understanding.

Through this process of inquiry, the primary purpose of the undergraduate psychology project is to provide the student with practice in asking and answering questions. In carrying out your project, you gain valuable experience and training in planning, conducting, analysing and presenting an independent

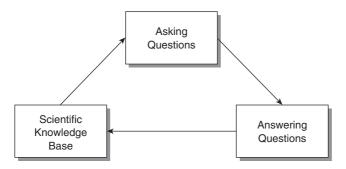


Figure 1.1 The scientific process of inquiry

research project. More specifically, you will develop the necessary skills involved in conducting library research, academic writing, designing research, collecting, analysing and interpreting data. Also, on a more general level, you will learn about the conventions and requirements of psychological research, which will equip you for post-graduate research, and for communication within the scientific field of psychology.

1.3 Quantitative and Qualitative Methods of Inquiry

A method is a systematic approach to a piece of research. Psychologists use a wide range of methods of inquiry. There are a number of ways in which the methods used by psychologists are classified, the most common being between quantitative and qualitative methods. Camic, Rhodes and Yardley (2004) note that it is time to abandon the view that what separates quantitative and qualitative approaches is whether to count or not to count, measure or not measure, sample or not sample. This view is supported by Shweder (1996, p. 179) because all social science research counts and measures in some way or another, the true difference is what to count and measure, and what one discovers.

It can therefore prove useful to view the quantitative and qualitative approaches to research in psychology as situations on opposite ends of a continuum representing the field of psychological research. Figure 1.2 illustrates that at one polar end of the continuum, there is pure quantitative research, apparent by clearly defined variables, theories and hypotheses. On the opposite end of the continuum is pure qualitative research in psychology, which relies on the subjective interpretation of cases and events. The qualitative and quantitative research undertaken by undergraduate students generally falls away from the polar ends of such a continuum. Quantitative research aims at having external as well as internal validity. Students also recognise the implications of very sterile laboratory conditions which are not transferable to real life settings, while qualitative research aims at making some contribution to