



STUDENTS

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Be proud of your project

BY MARK FORSHAW

It might be some time ago in many cases, but all psychologists have had the experience of conducting and reporting research in their final year of undergraduate study. To some, it is an experience filled with naive joy: they really believe they are on a quest to find something out that will, once and for all, put an end to this or that theory. Now and then, they are right, and the very best student projects are worthy of publication. To others, the project is a pain; they want it over as soon as possible. They are to be found in university corridors all over the country telling their friends that they are 'really stressed out about their dissertation'. But one thing the project certainly is – important.

All modern undergraduate psychology courses have the research project component in the final year, and it can often contribute as much as a quarter of the student's final degree class. With so much at stake it is crucial that the student takes off cleanly, cruises without incident through the data collection stage, and never needs to use the parachute – a supportive and encouraging supervisor, especially one with tricks up their sleeve to get the student back on track. It is common for students to feel like giving up, usually around halfway through, and at times like this they need to be reminded that it is worth it all – in terms of career opportunities for the good project student, or just getting it out of the way so that they can rest, watch football, go shopping, or do whatever they would prefer to be doing.

To my mind the project is the degree in microcosm. It brings together virtually everything the student has done for three or four years. Having read many project handbooks over the years, including those for MSc and other postgraduate courses, I have been struck by how the specific learning outcomes for a project can often read like a catalogue of key skills. You've got communication, problem solving, application of knowledge, time management, personal skills, literacy,

numeracy, and so on. It is a pity then that so few students realise this and sell themselves effectively to potential employers using this dramatic piece of evidence that they can cut the mustard. The project is where the student shows that they can put it all together and jiggle it about: analysis and synthesis, of course, are the proper words we choose for the curriculum vitae.



Projects can help prove to employers that you can cut the mustard

Heartbreaking though the research process can be, it is often easier to see it for its inherent comedy. The first point of humour is in choosing the topic to research. When students are left to their own devices to develop an idea, many make a great job of it, but a good proportion fail to learn the lesson that the most interesting questions in life are those we can't research. Problems here fall into two camps. Firstly, students may desire to take on something that is simply too great to tackle properly. Most supervisors have had to deal with taking the chainsaw of parsimony to the overgrown attempt by a student to find out 'why people love each other', or 'why there is war in the world', or 'whether health is determined by upbringing'. It is sometimes difficult to tell an enthusiastic but confused researcher that they are on a hiding to nothing. Supervisors have to resist the temptation to point out that a proposed ANOVA design will entail collecting data from a thousand participants

(because of cell sizes) yielding some rather uninterpretable seven-way interactions.

The second problem is the ethical one. As much as we try to foist our codes of conduct on students, now and then we meet with resistance from those who are keen on attaching a penile plethysmograph to participants and showing them pornography, or who want to rig up elaborate hoaxes to make unwitting passers-by feel genuine paranoia when an alarm bell rings as they pass a certain spot on campus every single day for a month.

Or they want to talk to serial murderers about their childhood. But what a student learns from their disappointment is a valuable lesson in being realistic, not to mention a hammering home of the ethical principles that underpin all of our work as psychologists.

Once a project has been decided upon, the student is left to the important business of data collection. For some, this is a matter of finding enough people willing to plough through pages of questions about why they smoke or what

they feel about public displays of affection. It is easy to believe that there will be a regular supply of respondents in a university environment, and I never fail to be amazed at how little enthusiasm for participation is displayed by other students, even though they are in the same boat. Some departments, of course, get around this by means of participation credits. Others shy away from this, perhaps because of the administration it involves, or ethical concerns (see a *Psychologist* article on this topic via tinyurl.com/5a5tj).

Students not backed up by such a system regularly rely on their negotiating skills, something else that they overlook when applying for that important first graduate post. Many students turn to other courses to attract participants, approaching lecturers in other departments, being polite and socially adept, and generally doing almost everything a seller does to clinch a deal. Some look to external organisations, such as patient groups, sports clubs, trade

unions, and so on. We must also remember that this is not a one-way process. Many of the organisations that are potential recruiting grounds for participants are also keen to learn the findings of the research. The student does have something to offer in return, and all of this bargaining and bartering is crucial experience for the world of work.

The student who is pursuing an experimental paradigm, perhaps in cognitive psychology, often has a whole array of technical problems to encounter and defeat when running their experiments. Most experimental work in this area involves a good level of understanding of specialist software, such as that used to present stimuli tachistoscopically, and a competence in the use of hardware is essential. They may have to work closely with departmental technicians in order to achieve their aims. Again, all of this counts highly in creating 'graduateness' for psychology. Cooperation is a valued gift, especially if it is multidisciplinary; so is the ability to tinker with mysterious machines to make them do all manner of special things.

If you're a qualitative student researcher, you are likely to be interviewing people as the staple of research. Interviewing is not an easy thing, and there's a good chance that you won't really get the hang of it before the project begins. It is more likely that you will learn on the job. However, by the end of the year you will have certainly gained some profound experience in talking to people and understanding how to react to them and make sense of what they say. Most qualitative methods allow for the interviewer to drag the wayward interviewee back to the topic if they have decided to natter about shopping or their favourite aunt instead of the key subject. This is focus, albeit on a microscopic scale. Macroscopically, no matter what your project, six to nine months on one piece of work certainly shows focus. There's also devotion, steadfastness and tenacity. Employers certainly look for these qualities.

When all the data is in, it is time to do something productive with it. Manipulation of the data, whether quantitative or qualitative, requires a high degree of analytical skill. Statistical acumen is something to be proud of in itself, but it

is also an indicator of a level of numeracy that is impressive. Similarly, we should never overlook the extent to which a student who is engaged in detailed and eagle-eyed combing through texts using a qualitative method is indicating a strong critical faculty. In the world of work, someone who can read between the lines is prized. Weighty reports drop on desks daily, and employees are required to critically assess them for their key themes and often to make hasty summaries of their contents. It is not uncommon for graduate employees to be asked to produce meaningful averages out of reams of data, and even to make predictions of future profits or resource implications, which the psychology graduate can easily do with their knowledge of the usefulness of techniques such as regression.

Finally, the student gets to the point of writing up. Most students have been awaiting this with some dread, mainly because the typical student has never created such a long piece of work for assessment before. Not only that, but they are all-too aware that they are writing something that can contribute as much as a quarter of their final degree classification. The most reassuring thing that we can say to students is that research reports are divided into sections, and those sections can be dealt with separately. Psychotherapists call this 'positive reframing', of course. It's also an example of task management (another phrase for the CV, perhaps?). However, much as the student dreads writing up for fear of not having enough to say, they often tend to find that they are running up against the word limit when they approach the deadline. With a bit of advice from the supervisor, the student learns to condense their work. With increasing pressures from journal editors to solve the world's problems in a paper of fewer than two thousand words, the ability to distil work is a key skill for any budding psychologist.

Overall, no matter whether the student has carried out research on anagram solution time, stereotyping in taxi drivers, or heart-rate reactivity in competitive pole vaulters, the very act of conducting this research shows a tremendous capacity to manage tasks over time. The project is not carried out in isolation, but whilst studying for other modules on a course, and, possibly, working part-time too. Fitting

all of this together and getting it done is impressive, even if the student does not realise it.

There are good reasons why students must undertake a research project, and most only realise this when it's all over. They learn more from that than perhaps anything else. It's a test of everything. No wonder it contributes so much to the final mark. Furthermore, in these days of allegedly burgeoning plagiarism in the higher education sector, it is a piece of coursework that is fairly immune from attempts at cheating. Only the most skilled in the arts of deceit are likely to walk away with impunity from colluding over or copying an entire research project. It is a test of the person, in so many ways, and a test of the psychologist inside the person. It is also a portfolio, and something for the hard-working individual to be proud of after the event. Even greater, for some psychologists it is the start of a long career and a focused research programme that threads right through postgraduate days and on to readerships, personal chairs and all sorts of honours. This is all the more likely if the psychologist-in-making can highlight the project as clear evidence to employers and course directors that they are 'research material'. Most can, but not all of those do.

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BEHIND THE NAME

by Noel Sheehy

The names **JOHN BOWLBY** and **MARY AINSWORTH** are synonymous with attachment theory. During the 1930s John was almost formally engaged to Lady Prudence Pelham, but that never materialised because he had an affair with her sister. This was followed by a tempestuous relationship with Rose Elton, a close friend of his brother Tony. It was Rose who introduced him to Ursula Longstaff. After a romantic holiday in Ireland they were married in 1938 on the same day that Ursula's parents were divorced. The making and breaking of attachments is potentially significant given the nature of Bowlby's contributions to psychology.

Further reading: Bretherton, I. (1992). The origins of attachment theory: John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth. *Developmental Psychology*, 28, 759–775.