

# YOUR PSYCHOLOGY DISSERTATION

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# 3

## Choosing a Research Topic

The ultimate aim of research, whether part of a student project or conducted by an academic member of staff or professional researcher, is to make a meaningful contribution to knowledge in the specified topic area. The first step in designing any research project is to identify what it is that you want to investigate. This chapter will guide you through the process of choosing a topic for your dissertation that is both *worthwhile* and *achievable* within the scope of your dissertation module.

### Learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you will:

- Be aware of methods that will help you to identify a topic for your dissertation
- Be able to consider what is feasible within the scope of your dissertation module.

### 3.1 Methods to help identify a topic

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The first step in designing your dissertation project is to decide on a topic area to focus on. In this section, we explore some methods for identifying a suitable topic for your project.

#### 3.1.1 Narrowing your focus: What interests you?

Narrowing your focus to a specific topic or research question can often seem quite a difficult task – particularly as you have covered so many different areas

of psychology in your studies to date. Your first step in deciding on a topic should be to consider which areas you have found most interesting on your course so far. Being interested in your topic is key to success – if you're interested in something, you're more likely to enjoy studying it and it will motivate you to work on it.

Top tip!  
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Choosing a topic that interests you means that you are more likely to keep motivated throughout the processes of designing, conducting and writing up your dissertation project. Remember that you will be studying for your dissertation at the same time as completing other modules – so outside of your timetabled lectures and seminars, you will need to be motivated enough to want to spend your independent study time reading papers, planning your project, collecting your data and writing your dissertation.

### 3.1.2 Revisiting course material

Start by revisiting your past course material, one module or topic at a time. Think about whether there are any unanswered questions or unresolved issues within these topics that could warrant further research, or if there is something that really captured your attention and made you want to find out more. Focusing on something that interests you can be the key to motivation in your dissertation – and this will link to success. Read back over lecture notes, key reading material and your own notes to identify relevant points for exploration – there might be reference to a theory or existing findings that make you question something or wonder whether it could be applied to a different population. In turn, this process can help you to identify gaps in existing literature and knowledge, which might formulate a basis for your own research project.

### 3.1.3 Exploring the expertise of your lecturers

As discussed in Chapter 2, you will most likely be allocated to a supervisor from your department who will guide you throughout the dissertation process on a one-to-one basis. We've already mentioned how important it is that you choose a topic you are interested in, but it is also important that you capture the attention of your readers too, and one way of ensuring that you capture the interest

of your supervisor is to explore their own areas of expertise. Start by reviewing staff profiles on your university webpage or in your course guides for an overview of their interests, and follow by reading some of their publications for a deeper insight into their research. These steps may raise points for discussion with your supervisor, which could suggest potential research questions for your own project. Depending on the supervision practices within your department or institution, your supervisor might stipulate the topic and/or research methodology for your dissertation, so it is important to consider the compatibilities between your own interests and your supervisor's expertise. Refer back to Chapter 2 for further advice on this relationship.

Most departments will run research seminars throughout the academic year, so consider attending these to gain a deeper insight into the research being conducted in the wider department. It is a good idea to start doing this in advance of your dissertation module, as this can help you to prepare your ideas. Look out for presentations representing a range of psychological research topics and research methods – this will help you to develop multidisciplinary thinking (a good employability skill!), but also develops confidence in discussing and critiquing research, which will be beneficial to you when you start to write your literature review. Attending these events can provide you with a valuable insight into potential project topics, designs and methodologies. Showing willingness to attend these sessions also impresses potential supervisors and gives you a chance to talk to them about their research and gain experience of networking in a similar way to academic conferences.

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EMPLOYABILITY  
TIP!

Attend your department's research seminars for a chance to develop your multidisciplinary thinking, critical discussion and networking skills. You'll learn about current research in your department as well as having an opportunity to speak to researchers directly about their projects.

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### **3.1.4 Current affairs and 'hot topics'**

There might be a particular issue in the news, media or politics at the time you are designing your study that raises potential research questions, or recent developments in an area of interest which could provide a focal point for investigation. Typical examples are Brexit, police cuts, knife crime, terrorism, mental health in education, and various health epidemics, which have all sparked a recent interest

from psychological researchers. One thing that you will need to consider when designing your study is the practical applications of potential findings – what contribution could your project make to knowledge in this area, and what impact could your research have in the real world? Focusing on a current issue in the news, media or society means that you have an obvious practical application in terms of informing knowledge, policy and practice. Think about issues in the news and whether there are any gaps in our knowledge in explaining a particular behaviour, phenomenon or outcome. If you do decide to go down this route of selecting a so-called ‘hot topic’, an important thing to be mindful of is that you are conducting a *psychology* dissertation, so you will need to look at such phenomena from a psychological perspective and apply psychological theory to help you explain it.

You can also identify hot topics by keeping up to date with psychological publications and social media accounts. It goes without saying that reading journal papers is one of the best ways to immerse yourself in existing research, but there are other ways of keeping up to date as well. Viewing conference proceedings can give you an insight into current research which may not yet be published, providing up-to-date information on current research findings and developments. Additionally, psychologists’ blog sites, such as the BPS researcher digest and social media pages are good sources of topical discussions and can give you an insight into their viewpoints and ongoing research developments. Consider these as points for reflection – if you find something that interests you, reflect on what researchers have identified still needs to be done. This could form a basis for your own project.

### **3.1.5 Study replications**

As you are reading through your course notes, you’ll probably come across a multitude of classic theories which are most probably outdated – for example, Jean Piaget’s conservation tasks, which were highly criticised for being too difficult for child participants to understand. You might find yourself questioning these theories and wondering whether a replication in the modern world would present different findings. There is value in replication, and it should not be overlooked as an important type of scientific research. Indeed, research must be replicated a number of times before we can accept the findings as a reliable and true representation. Over time or across different groups, findings may differ, even if the experimental conditions and methodology remain the same, so replications allow researchers to test theories about variables, relationships and effects.

Alternatively, you might consider whether an adaptation of an existing study would increase applicability to the modern world. Perhaps you could adapt an

existing task for use in your own project. Alternatively, you may come across theories that were only tested in a very specific population, and you may find yourself wondering whether such a theory could be applied to a different population or subgroup. Replicating existing studies in new populations is popular amongst dissertation students, but remember that you need to be able to justify your decisions – so think about *why* you are doing this – why do we need to know whether a theory or finding also applies to a different population? What impact could this have?

### 3.1.6 Personal experiences

Often, our ideas are rooted in our own experiences. We are more likely to be interested in something that affects us or relates to our own lives. You may have experience of working in a particular area through volunteering or your part-time job, which might give you access to an otherwise difficult-to-access population. You may have a family member or friend with a physical or mental disability or learning difficulty, which may have sparked an interest in researching this further. You may have experienced a situation in your own life that has made you question a particular theory or existing protocol, or simply made you want to find out more or want to help people in the same situation. Utilising contacts from your personal life can provide you with access to participants in specific fields, and building upon your interests from your own experiences can provide valuable findings that can be applied to enhance knowledge and have implications for practice in the real world. Be cautious though – adopting a topic that is too ‘close to home’ has the potential to be damaging for your own mental health. For example, it would be advisable to avoid projects investigating depression if you suffer from mental health difficulties yourself. An important part of ethical approval is considering the impact that the research could have on you as a researcher; you need to protect yourself as well as your participants.

Top tip!



Be careful not to get too carried away or design a project that is too ambitious. As researchers, we have a tendency to want to change the world - but in reality, that's probably not going to be possible within the scope of a dissertation.

### 3.1.7 Links to your future career

In line with building on your interests, you might choose to conduct a dissertation project which has links to your future career aspirations. When you are applying

for graduate jobs or postgraduate study, you will probably be asked about your dissertation – what did you do it on, and what did you learn? As well as discussing the transferable skills that you have developed throughout your degree, it's a great talking point if you can share some of your research findings with people who work in the field or who can relate to your research project. Perhaps you might be interested in going on to study a master's degree or to enrol on a training programme in an applied area of psychology – conducting your dissertation in a related field is a great way of kick-starting your experience of working and researching in this area.

Like many students, you might not know exactly what you want to do in the future, but you should be aware of how your dissertation could influence your path in life. As an academic now, I (Emily Harrison) often reflect on my own dissertation experience: I am a classic example of how your dissertation can open doors to your future career. When I was an undergraduate student, I chose to conduct my dissertation in the area of reading development as I had always been fascinated by how children learn to read. After discussing my interests with my supervisor, I conducted my dissertation investigating the relationship between children's sensitivity to the rhythm of spoken language and various literacy skills. I loved my dissertation from start to finish, and afterwards I was lucky enough to be offered a studentship to complete my PhD in a related area. Doing my PhD gave me other opportunities to engage in teaching at undergraduate level, which I'd never considered before, and I loved it! I've never looked back since, and I have my dissertation supervisor to thank for where I am now – I certainly wouldn't be writing this book if my experience had been different!

Top tip!



Take time to consider your ideas, discuss them with your supervisor and consider what opportunities your dissertation could create for your future.

Homework



We've presented a range of methods above that can help you to identify a topic for your dissertation. Create a spider diagram for each method, and then look for common links between them – is there something that links your interests to your supervisor's expertise and your future career aspirations?

## 3.2 Original versus worthwhile

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Whilst it is important to choose a topic that interests you, your research topic also needs to be something that is meaningful and worthwhile researching. Creating originality in your design is one way of producing new findings that make a unique contribution to knowledge – to do this you will need to identify a gap – we’ll talk more about this in Chapter 4. But remember, just because there is an apparent gap in current research or knowledge, it doesn’t necessarily mean that this is something that needs to be researched – or even *can* be researched, particularly within the scope of a dissertation. As you develop your rationale, you need to think about the reasons *why* you have chosen to design this particular project – and simply saying that it hasn’t been done before is unfortunately not sufficient. You will need to argue the case for why your project is needed. It’s not just about what we don’t know about a topic, it’s also about why we need to know more – why is it worthwhile? A replication can still answer this question, as it is always worthwhile double-checking research findings – it is not necessary for your study to be completely original in its design.

Top tip!



Research is about making a meaningful contribution to knowledge - consider why we need to know this; justification is key.

## 3.3 What is feasible?

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As mentioned in Chapter 1, most departments will be fairly flexible in allowing you to conduct your dissertation in almost any area of psychology. This is obviously subject to ethical approval and access to participants, so you may need to consider an alternative design in order to meet ethical requirements. Your university ethics committee will have a duty of care towards you as a student and will need to ensure that you are protected from physical and psychological harm in the same way that you must protect your participants. As such, it’s unlikely that you would be permitted to work with offenders or to collect data in a dangerous environment. You also need to consider what is possible within the scope and time frame of an undergraduate dissertation. It’s common for students interested in health psychology to want to work with the NHS, but for this you would also need to gain NHS ethical approval, which can be a lengthy process. For this reason, we would discourage students from pursuing projects with these populations at undergraduate level, and to think about alternative ways of exploring



your chosen topic area. For example, rather than working with offenders, you could explore people's perceptions of offenders; or rather than working with terminally ill patients, you could explore the experiences of family members or people working in close proximity to these patients.

As well as considering what is possible in terms of access to participants, it is also important to consider what is realistic in terms of your design within the time frame of your dissertation module. Don't overcomplicate things – students have a tendency to be overly ambitious with project design and we often have to remind them that the dissertation needs to be completed within a few months and in just a single study! A simple design allows you more room to explore your theoretical perspective, develop a stronger rationale, clearly explain your design and explore your findings in more detail. This can often reward you with a higher mark than if you try to cram in too many research questions or variables, and you can always discuss your other ideas in the section on 'directions for future research' in your discussion chapter.

Top tip!



Don't overcomplicate things - sometimes a simpler design will reward you with a higher mark as it allows you more time and space to explore your theoretical perspective, justify your decisions and explain your findings in detail.

### 3.4 What makes a good project idea?

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So, taking all of the above into consideration, what makes a good project idea? Well, it's a little like building a house. Firstly, it needs to have strong foundations – it needs to be rooted in psychological literature. It needs to be strong – to stand up to criticism, to have a strong rationale. It needs to have a selling point – something that makes a meaningful contribution to knowledge. It needs to be realistic and achievable – something that you can manage within the scope of your dissertation module. And to complete it, you'll need specialist knowledge and skills – so it needs to be something that you have a clear understanding of.

Consider what skills you already have that you can utilise in your dissertation – what do you have a clear understanding of? You might recall a particular lecture or topic that you enjoyed because you understood it better than others. This might be a useful starting point for you. Consider research methodology as well as the topic – what methods do you understand better than others? What are

you good at? Look back at your marks and feedback for your coursework in your other modules and consider what you have done well at so far. Whilst there needs to be a clear link between your research question and your methodology, don't be afraid to play to your strengths.

Top tip!



Ask yourself not just what you are interested in, but also what you are good at, and what you have a clear understanding of. Play to your strengths and you are likely to succeed.

Generally, a good project idea is one that has been well thought out, one that has a strong rationale and one that makes a clear contribution to knowledge. Below are some common pitfalls that we have observed with student projects in the past, to give you an idea of what to avoid.

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## Common pitfalls

- Having your heart set on researching a particular phenomenon and later finding that access to participants is too difficult or time-consuming for your dissertation
  - Deciding on a topic or research question without taking the time to research it fully and later discovering that there is little to no psychological literature related to it and/or no clear rationale for studying it
  - Deciding on a topic or research question based on your lecture notes or textbooks without reading recent journal articles. If you start to design your study without reading recent journal articles, you run the risk of later discovering that your project idea has already been done
  - Deciding on a research design that is unlikely to gain ethical approval. If your ethics application gets rejected, you will have no choice but to change your design, losing valuable research time in doing so. You are already on a tight timescale with your dissertation module, so you can't afford to keep going backwards and forwards with ethics. For this reason, it is really important that you understand the ethical requirements from the beginning, and that you discuss your ideas with your supervisor as soon as possible
  - Including too many research questions and/or variables in your design, making your study too complex and running the risk of running out of time and/or not being able to address everything in sufficient detail.
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## Chapter summary

- In this chapter, we have discussed ways of identifying a suitable research topic: by considering your interests, revisiting course material, exploring the expertise of your lecturers, considering current 'hot topics', considering study replications, thinking about your personal experiences and your future career aspirations.
- We have discussed what makes a good project: something worthwhile, not overly ambitious, and feasible within the scope of your dissertation module.

## Checklist

- ✓ Work through the sections of this chapter and consider your ideas in relation to each method of selecting a topic.
- ✓ If you have not done so already, book an appointment with your supervisor to talk through your ideas and what is feasible within the scope of your dissertation module.