

The Importance of Doing Research (Earnestly!)

Imagination is more important than knowledge.
– Albert Einstein

Why do I have to do research? This is a question that psychology students often pose when considering what courses to take and how to complete the requirements for their undergraduate degree. Although it is easy to dismiss such a question as patently obvious, it is in fact an interesting and valuable question that students should be encouraged to raise. A fair number of our students view our research method courses as obstacles to “overcome” so that they can focus on courses they see as more interesting, worthwhile, and/or perhaps easier.

I find this attitude slightly disturbing (and I suspect many of my colleagues do as well), and have wondered about its origins. Most assuredly, the reason does not lie with our faculty, for they are indeed outstanding and deeply committed to teaching excellence. It is not because our students are underprepared for research—this journal and student posters and presentations at WestConn Research Day and WCSU Psychology Day provide compelling evidence to the contrary. There are a number of other possible explanations, including a fear of the statistical/mathematical component of research courses, or a worry that the courses require not only mastery of knowledge, but also the application of the scientific method (*doing* rather than just *thinking*). In addition, perhaps the sequential nature and minimum grade requirement of some of these courses give the partially accurate yet intimidating impression that they together constitute what is essentially a two-year course. Although these and other factors may contribute to the fear response to the methods sequence that so many students have announced, I’d like instead to focus on another possibility, one that is typically associated with classes situated in a writing department: fear of a lack of a *voice*.

By *fear of lack of voice*, I mean the fear of many psychology majors that they will be unable to articulate and study interesting questions about psychological processes (ironically, many beginning graduate students have similar concerns). Our undergraduates have, by the time they are asked to design and run their own experiments, come to understand the importance of the scientific method and to realize how much effort is exerted by psychological scientists when conducting quality research. This important recognition can have the unintended consequence of generating anxiety in our students. What I’d like to do in the remainder of this essay is offer gentle guidance for students regarding the development of questions and hypotheses that will be of interest to them. Here I’ll be paraphrasing several of the 49 suggestions from the recently deceased social psychologist, William J. McGuire (1997).

Some of the ways in which researchers can generate questions that they can subsequently test include:

1. Recognizing and trying to account for odd natural occurrences
2. Attempting to understand ordinary events that seem to defy explanation
3. Analyzing one’s own behavior (and trying to explain it)
4. Using deductive reasoning and trying to determine whether general principles apply in a given situation or context
5. Noticing the inconsistency between results reported by other researchers pertaining to the same psychological event or process
6. Examining the impact of a particular contextual variable on a psychological event or process.
7. Investigating alternative manipulations of an independent variable.
8. Following up on a “suggestion for future research” in the discussion section of a published article
9. Uncovering and addressing potential flaws in extant research
10. Extending a theory into a new domain or applying it to a new situation

I do believe that psychology researchers do need to find their own voice, and I strongly encourage our undergraduates—especially those who plan to attend graduate school—to spend a little extra time pondering questions that intrigue them and then incorporate these questions into their research projects. I hope that, by doing so, the research methods sequence will be seen not as a set of requirements that one needs to “get through” but rather as an opportunity for creative, independent thinking.

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Reference

McGuire, W.J. (1997). Creative hypothesis generating in psychology: Some useful heuristics. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 48, 1-30.