

The Practical Researcher

A Student Guide to Conducting Psychological Research

Dana S. Dunn

Moravian College



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THE PRACTICAL RESEARCHER: A STUDENT GUIDE TO CONDUCTING PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH

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*For Sarah, Jacob, and Hannah
meine Liebe und meine Arbeit*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dana S. Dunn is currently Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychology at Moravian College, a liberal arts and sciences college in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Dunn received his PhD in experimental social psychology from the University of Virginia in 1987, having previously graduated with a BA in psychology from Carnegie Mellon University in 1982. He has taught research methods in psychology for over 10 years. Dunn has published numerous articles and chapters in the areas of social cognition, rehabilitation psychology, the teaching of psychology, and liberal education. He lives in Bethlehem with his wife and two children.

REFACE

Knowledge is learned contextually, but meant to be applied broadly, in general ways; with experience, students should come to know this truth. I teach at a liberal arts college where it is the norm to have the same students in several different classes across their four undergraduate years. Like many teachers, I notice my students sometimes fail to apply knowledge acquired in one class to related issues in subsequent classes. I notice an acute breakdown between knowledge and application in the case of research methods, an especially troubling occurrence because research methods is arguably the most important course for undergraduate psychology students. Yet I know that my students *know* their methodology: They just are not sure what to do with it or how to go about using it outside the familiar context of a research methods class.

Ideally, students will use *The Practical Researcher* in a traditional first research methods course where some exposure to research occurs. In combining critical theory with a step-by-step guide to developing a research project, this text can also serve as an excellent practical guide for independent studies or honors projects embarking on a semester-long or yearlong project.

The Practical Researcher addresses the gap between knowing and using the discipline's research methodology. It is written in an intentionally accessible way so students will not wrestle with overly technical prose while learning about the technical processes of research methods. A "practical researcher" is someone who knows how to translate the theoretical side of research methodology into practice. Theory is critically important to the teaching of research methods, but it does little good if students cannot use it effectively in actual research

Experiential

projects. Generally speaking, most undergraduate research methods books describe essential concepts about what constitutes good psychological research, but rarely provide concrete guidance about how to actually go about *doing* good research. Unlike most books, this text acknowledges that research methodology was created to be used, not merely studied.

Practical

Thus, *The Practical Researcher* addresses the “how-to” side of doing psychological research by teaching students to organize a research project from start to finish. It contains the material that is traditionally presented in solid research methods texts (e.g., the logic of random assignment, measuring and manipulating psychological variables), but supplements it with exercises designed to help students practice research skills (e.g., How do you randomly assign a subject to one of three conditions in your study? How does one keep a record of independent and dependent variables?). I believe that teaching students practical techniques will enable them to more easily conduct psychological research. Additionally, establishing pedagogical links between knowledge and its application, emphasizing theory as well as practice, will help students retain what they learn, thereby preparing them for graduate school or careers where problem solving and familiarity with research methodologies are desirable.

ORGANIZATION

Research Oriented

The text chapters are arranged sequentially, following the basic order of a research project. Because the book is a guide to the practical side of the research process, however, chapters can be read either sequentially or in an order determined by the instructor. As a textbook, *The Practical Researcher* is a hands-on guide that helps students develop research skills, conduct research, and learn to be researchers. Most chapters include one or more practical research exercises. These exercises, which are designed to enhance writing, interpretive, organizational, and time management skills, appear after a brief conceptual introduction of relevant topics. Students can model these examples for their own work, modify them, or in several cases, “fill in” the blanks or checklists provided in the exercises. Those who engage in collaborative research, for example, will be encouraged to write and sign a research contract with their peers so that an effective division of labor is possible (chapter 1). Chapter 5, which is devoted to ethical issues, provides instruction on developing and writing Informed Consent Forms, debriefing scripts, Human Subject Pool sign-up sheets, and research participation credit slips. In chapter 8, students learn to interpret basic statistical results by putting into words the relationships that common inferential tests examine, a required skill invariably neglected by many existing methodology texts. Chapters close with brief summaries and lists of key terms with page numbers where explanation or examples can be found in the text. Recommended readings with short annotations conclude each chapter, building upon themes discussed therein.

Each chapter contains one or more boxed features called “Research Digressions.” The Research Digressions are meant to provide the reader with contextual information that supplements the main text. The boxes variously answer questions provoked in the reader, present practical applications of the material, indicate advanced topics for further study, or clarify discussions in the main text by exploring detailed examples.

The importance of writing well and often is stressed throughout the book, and I have taken a decidedly different approach than most methods texts where writing is concerned. Unlike most informal research methods textbooks that give short shrift to writing, I devote an entire, early chapter to writing in psychology (chapter 3). This text does far more than place its discussion in a final or “throw-away” chapter, or focusing exclusively on American Psychological Association (APA) writing style issues (though the latter are discussed in great detail). I also avoid the worst sin of all, which is to consign matters of writing to oblivion—or simply an appendix.

What do I do about writing? I make the case that writing is—or should be—the first and last consideration of all teachers, researchers, and students of psychology. Beyond learning to present research results in prose form, I discuss how to generate research ideas through writing, how to outline papers, and how to give and receive effective peer feedback on written material. As will be evident to many readers, I am indebted to pedagogical strides made by writing instructors over the last decade or so (and it is my fond hope that psychologists will embrace, even extend, this good work done by their colleagues in the humanities). Writing is germane to the majority of the book’s aforementioned exercises, and a necessary skill for developing research ideas, searching the psychological literature, laying the ground work for the eventual research project, and presenting results to peers in formal or informal settings.

Studying the methodology of psychology matters a great deal, but learning to use these methods to explore research questions matters still more. I hope this book will help students to gain disciplinary knowledge as well as practice, to use the particular to interpret the general.

Writing Oriented

SUPPLEMENTS

The Practical Researcher is accompanied by an Instructor’s Manual/Test Bank (ISBN 0-07-018324-4). I wrote the Instructor’s Manual/Test Bank, which provides the instructor with additional course tools that will expand on the course material presented in the text. It contains complete and detailed outlines for each chapter, lecture suggestions, chapter exercises, additional class activities (including debate topics, guest speakers, field trips to campus sites, discussion suggestions), suggested readings, and class discussion/essay questions. Each chapter is followed by approximately 30 multiple-choice questions, which are classified as factual, conceptual or applied. These test questions are also available in both Windows (0-07-025184-3) and Mac (0-07-025200-9) versions of a computerized

test bank. Please contact your local McGraw-Hill representative for details concerning policies, prices, and availability, as some restrictions may apply.

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Writing often involves listeners before readers, and in any case, it is never a solitary pursuit. I am grateful to the many individuals who assisted me with this project. Editor Sarah Dunn was, at turns, compassionate or appropriately ruthless about my prose. Stacey Zaremba good naturedly heard my complaints, offering insights and references in return. The usual suspects—Steve Gordy, Robert Stinson, and Peter von Allmen—offered advice, quips, and sometimes solace. As she has done on so many prior occasions and projects, Mrs. Jacqueline Giaquinto helped in ways great and small with manuscript preparation, organization, and details too numerous to track. The Moravian College Faculty Development and Research Committee provided a summer grant enabling me to finish the work. Bob Brill, Reeves Library's crack Reference and Interlibrary Loan Departments, and my students, Carolyn Vicchiullo, Brett Stoudt, Barbara Loecher, and those enrolled in my statistics and research methods classes, provided comments or materials for particular sections of the manuscript. Dah K. Dunn merits special thanks for her perpetual enthusiasm for the book.

The peer reviewers who read and critiqued various and sundry chapter drafts offered me wisdom, occasional wit, and pedagogical advice. I am grateful for the exceptionally helpful editorial comments made by Carolyn Gosling, Marion Harrell, and Demarie Jackson of the American Psychological Association. The manuscript was much improved by the thoughtful and substantive comments of Bernard Beins (Ithaca College), David B. Conner (Truman State University), Susan Dutch (Westfield State College), Kathleen Hart (Xavier University), Rosemary Hornak (Meredith College), John C. Jahnke (Miami University), Brenda Kirby (Le Moyne College), Donna J. LaVoie (Saint Louis University), Leslie MacGregor (Berry College), Dennis Musselman (Humboldt State University), Mark A. Pitt (Ohio State University), Kirk Richardson (Georgia State University), Jerome Siegel (The City College of New York), Christopher Silva (Dickinson College), Benjamin Wallace (Cleveland State University), and several anonymous reviewers. I relied upon many of the ideas, suggestions, and insights given by these teacher-scholars, though by no means all; remaining errors are mine alone.

Any author should have the good fortune to work with dedicated professionals like those inhabiting the McGraw-Hill College Division. Craig Brooks initiated contact about this project, and then Jane Vaicunas, Brian McKean, Susan Elia, with their collective editorial prowess, moved it forward. Meera Dash, Joe Terry, and Susan Kunchandy helped to refine the book's scope in its later stages, and drew the writing and editorial process to a successful close. Sarah Greer Bush copyedited the manuscript with aplomb. The support and interest of all of these professionals in the book was unstinting, and therefore, most gratifying.

Naturally, I am keenly interested in faculty and student reaction to the book. Comments concerning what you liked, disliked, missed, or wanted more of are most welcome. A short questionnaire appears at the end of the book. I urge you to complete it and mail it to the publisher, who will share it with me. You may also contact me directly at the Department of Psychology, Moravian College, 1200 Main Street, Bethlehem, PA 18018-6650; via e-mail: dunn@moravian.edu.

In the end, I am especially grateful to my family—Sarah, Jacob, and Hannah—for their love, tolerance, and understanding throughout the project.

Dana S. Dunn

READER SURVEY: The Practical Researcher

I very much hope that this book helped you to understand research methods in psychology. I also hope that you had a chance to use ideas and exercises from the book in your own research.

I sincerely want to improve future editions of this book, and your honest responses to the following questions will help me a great deal. Would you please take a few minutes to complete the survey and then mail it back to the publisher in the envelope provided? Thank you.

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Thanks once again for your help.

Best regards,

Dana S. Dunn

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The Why and How of Psychological Research

A practical researcher is one who knows how to cleverly transform the theory behind psychology's research methodology into practice. Most research methods text books describe essential, though often abstract, concepts about what constitutes good psychological research, but they rarely provide concrete guidance about how to actually *do* good research. Theory is obviously very important—even crucial—to research methods, but so is being able to effectively implement key ideas and techniques in actual research projects. This book will combine these two perspectives in order to teach you to be a practical researcher. Indeed, by the time you have finished reading it, you will be able to conduct a theory-based research project in psychology from start to finish.

Chapter 1 is an overview of the issues presented in the remainder of the book. The first half of this chapter will introduce the theoretical orientation of the field of psychology. Practical issues to consider when beginning psychological research will be the focus of the second half of the chapter.

WHY DO RESEARCH?

An obvious question relevant to any book on research methods in psychology is the following: Why study human behavior? In a sense, we need to think about why research is important or worth doing before we launch into an entire book devoted to the mechanics and intricacies of actually doing it. In what ways does research allow us to move from