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[Paltoglou, Aspasia Eleni](#) (2020) Book Review: Doing Your Qualitative Psychology Project. Sullivan, C., Gibson, S. & Riley, S. (Eds), Sage Publications, (2012). *Qualitative Methods in Psychology Bulletin*, Spring (29).

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**Publisher:** BPS

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## BOOK REVIEW

### **Doing Your Qualitative Psychology Project.**

Sullivan, C., Gibson, S. & Riley, S. (Eds), Sage Publications, (2012).

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Conducting an independent project, either in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of an undergraduate psychology degree or as part of a Master's degree in Psychology is typically the most independent and creative piece of work of the whole degree. Students are usually asked to come up with an original study, which can be qualitative or quantitative. Throughout the degree we aim to equip the students with the skills to become independent scholars, therefore the dissertation is the culmination of everything they have learned in the previous units of the degree. In my experience, qualitative projects tend to be preferred by students, sometimes due to a misconception that they are easier than quantitative projects. *Doing Your Qualitative Psychology Project* helps to dispel the myth that doing a qualitative project is 'easy', and it guides the reader through what a good qualitative project entails.

Each chapter is dedicated to each major important step that is involved in doing a qualitative project. Chapter one introduces the structure and the aims of the book. One of the most important issues covered in this chapter is the breakdown of critical thinking into nine clear and logical questions. The next chapter is dedicated to coming up with a research question. Kathryn Kinmond takes the reader from deciding what their general area of interest is, to identifying a research topic within that area, and honing in on a specific research question. This is potentially one of the most overwhelming parts of doing a dissertation, and the authors manage to break it down into small manageable steps and include some useful activities.

In chapter three, Sullivan and Riley advise the students on how to deal with ethics. It is important that students become aware of the ethical implications of their studies, and not consider it as an unnecessary bureaucratic hurdle. Applying for ethical approval for a study is an important and necessary part of research that aims to protect both researchers and participants. The chapter outlines the different parts of the ethics application, and again breaks the process down into manageable chunks. Some very useful advice about planning the project is also included in this chapter.

In the next chapter, chapter four, the authors give advice on how to manage the project, including time management, and how to visualise the project with smaller goals. Working on a psychology project means that the student needs to be able to organize their time by themselves and go through all the steps required for the project in their own time. They typically have only one real deadline, the project submission at the end. Doing a project requires systematic work over several months, and it is certainly not something one can do the night before the deadline. That is why time management is so important. Links to very helpful websites are included and students are reminded that qualitative projects have cyclical designs. Additionally, chapter 4 considers some of the issues that can arise when a student is conducting a qualitative project, most notably managing the relationship with one's supervisor. Interestingly, the students are advised to speak to their personal tutor if there are problems with the supervisor. This is a very good point, although in some institutions the supervisor is also the personal tutor. Given that the project is not an easy undertaking, it is important to be able to have an additional person to talk to, in case the

relationship with the supervisor becomes problematic. If the supervisor and the personal tutor are the same person, then I would advise the students to speak to the unit leader of the dissertation unit. Such issues are not necessarily uncommon and this is perhaps an area the authors could further address within the next edition.

Delving further into the project itself, chapter five considers the literature review. Doing a literature review is a very important part of the project, for deciding what project to do, for honing in on a specific research question, and for writing the introduction of the dissertation. The key take away from this chapter is a reminder from Michael Forrester to tell a compelling story in a creative way, rather than just present a list of relevant studies. This is very good advice, worth remembering for any kind of writing.

Collecting and analysing data is what the authors tackle next in chapters six and seven. Hugh-Jones and Gibson advise the reader to remember the assumptions that lie behind their choice of methods. This chapter gives some very useful practical tips. For example, the reader is advised to analyse the first interview before conducting more interviews. After that, the authors give tips on how to analyse qualitative data and a very clear and straightforward account of the different analysis methods. In both of these chapters, the authors emphasize the importance of consistency between epistemological approach, the data analysis and collection methods, and the research question. Overall, the authors provide a concise and clear overview of many important data collection and analysis methods. If more detail is needed, the readers are directed to other sources, which can provide more specific detail for their chosen methodology.

The eighth chapter aims to equip the reader with critical skills on how to evaluate qualitative studies. This is relevant when doing a dissertation, as the students have to evaluate both previous studies and their own study. This chapter also refers to reflection, which is an important part of the qualitative research process. The authors indicate that the use of research diaries can be very beneficial, especially when using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Research diaries are not just useful for the analysis, but can feed on to the reflection. I cannot help thinking that reflection and research diaries could be very useful for quantitative research too, but that is outside the remit of the book.

The next two chapters are all about writing. Chapter nine aims to help the student with writing up the report. It advises the reader to get into the habit of writing: one can start with 'easy' pieces of writing, such as preparing the ethics forms. It then goes through every subsection with some advice on what to include, as well as useful tips. I giggled when it read 'do not use reading this chapter as a way of avoiding writing your thesis'. I was reading the chapter as a way of avoiding doing corrections to a publication I was struggling with, how did they know? The readers are then reminded that there is life after the dissertation. Sullivan makes it clear that having done a dissertation can be used as evidence for proving that the student has acquired numerous important skills when applying for employment after graduating.

There is also advice for publishing the data from the dissertation and there is a very interesting distinction made: according to Sullivan, the important thing for publishing is the extent to which the data are interesting, rather than how well the dissertation is written. This caught my attention as in my experience we tend to tell the students that they can publish their research only if they are awarded a first for their dissertation. To be awarded a first class mark means that the student wrote a very good dissertation. It does not necessarily mean that the data were interesting. Reading this made me think that perhaps the way we approach publishing student projects should be slightly different.

Finally, chapter 11 summarizes what was said throughout the book and puts the whole process of doing the research project into perspective. It asks the student to approach the process of doing the dissertation as an apprenticeship to become a scholar, a process that could possibly lead to catching the research bug. They advise the students to manage uncertainty associated with research by preparing as much as possible. Gibson, Sullivan and Riley also remind the student of the methodological kite, which refers to the interconnectivity between epistemology/ontology, analysis, research questions and data collection. They re-emphasize how important it is for these four elements to be in agreement with each other. This methodological kite is a recurring theme within the book, and rightly so. And of course there is a kite on the book cover!

This book has many strengths. It provides a good overview of the theoretical background and key issues involved in doing a qualitative project. More importantly, there is a plethora of very useful, clearly written and accessible practical advice, as well as case studies. Furthermore, complicated concepts are very well explained, without too much jargon. The authors also point out common pitfalls, include some practical activities and some very helpful figures. There are several boxes with top tips, in a nutshell boxes, decision flow charts, and further reading which help to provide further information, without overwhelming the reader.

Similarly, the book breaks down the different processes involved in doing a qualitative project into logical and manageable chunks. This is very important, as the student is asked to complete a large piece of work all at once. It can be overwhelming and difficult to know how to tackle it. Breaking down a large project in smaller manageable pieces is actually a very useful transferable skill, so it is brilliant that the authors place so much emphasis on it.

The extensive experience of the authors on supervising projects shines through, especially when referring to success stories (perhaps of students they had the privilege to work with?), as well as annotated examples of their own writing to show what good academic writing looks like. These practical and vivid examples provide nuance of what is required in order to do a satisfactory project, which is considerably more helpful than just describing abstract steps of what is a difficult and complicated process.

To summarize, this is a textbook aimed at undergraduate and postgraduate psychology students starting their own independent qualitative project. It is a relatively brief textbook that provides an overview of the whole process of doing a qualitative project, from thinking of initial ideas, to writing up the dissertation. If you are looking for a guide that gives you detail on how to do a certain analysis, or learn in depth about an epistemological stance, this is not the book for you. It is an 'overview' book and thus it does not go into great detail for any of the data collection or analysis methods. However, the authors provide a suggested reading list for those that would like to delve deeper into an issue. I think from the point of view of a student about to embark on their qualitative dissertation, this fairly brief overview is ideal. As the authors put it, the book is 'a map of the terrain, rather than a vehicle to carry you across it' (p20). Armed with the methodological kite, the students should be able to navigate around this new and potentially challenging terrain with confidence and run a reasonably good first qualitative study. This is an essential book to read before embarking on one's first qualitative project.