

Debating point

## Student Research and Ethics: Contributing to the debate

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**A**S CO-CHAIRS OF the Psychology Ethics and Research Committee at Nottingham Trent University, we read with interest Hugh Foot's article on student research and ethics (Debating Point, *PTR* 12(1)). Certainly, we would agree with the author that there is no case for accepting less stringent ethical criteria where the researcher is a student. On the contrary, we would argue that greater attention and more stringent measures should be applied to student research as students are still undergoing research training. We find that our students inevitably can be attracted to 'sensational' real world research areas that require extra sensitivity and, while we are loathe to restrict their freedoms in choosing their own research topics for their final-year projects, we are aware of the problems this can entail. In our division, all students wishing to undertake primary research (such as that required for their final year research project) complete a comprehensive ethics and risk form, which has been developed from protocols recommended by the British Psychological Society (BPS). Additional information is provided to the students (guidelines and requirements on minimising researcher risk, the use of psychometric tests, working with vulnerable populations, and conducting internet-mediated research) and students are required to sign that they have read, and will abide by, these guidelines and requirements. Each form is signed off by both student and supervisor after (we hope!) discussion, and is sent out for review to two individuals from the division who review it separately. There may also be supplementary information

attached to the form for example, consent forms, letters requesting access etc. At this stage reviewers are asked to specifically flag any issues that could be of concern no matter how minor. Once a form has been reviewed, it is discussed at the next Ethics and Risk Committee (ERC) meeting and decisions are recorded. Committee meetings are generally held once a week to ensure that student work is not unnecessarily delayed by the ethics process. At the meeting the committee draws upon the reviewers' comments but is also free to diverge from them in its decision if deemed appropriate (all decisions are by member consensus). Decision making by the committee diffuses responsibility for the decision, and offers support to the supervisor rather than undermining their position. Outright rejection is extremely rare, instead explicit guidance is given as to what changes need making in order to gain ethical approval. We see this very much as part of the educational process for our students as they are encouraged to reflect on the implications of their practices. Students can then resubmit their amended forms.

Like Hugh Foot we also felt there was a need for ethical review of classroom practical work. In our division all proposed practical work (e.g. carried out in labs and research methods teaching) is submitted by the session leader to the ERC for consideration. Only after approval would these practicals be incorporated into the teaching curriculum. For practicals that involve students designing elements of the study themselves (for example, in our level 2 modules the general topic and method are prescribed but the specifics

are decided by the student), the generality of the practical is approved in principle and ethical approval for the student designed elements is then devolved to the lecturer leading the session. This system appears to be similar to the one described by Hugh Foot, and we find it has worked very well.

Although this system did take some time and effort to set up, it now runs very smoothly. Alongside the introduction of this system we reviewed our teaching of ethical procedures and practices in order to facilitate the students' engagement with our ethics processes. We are now happy and confident that the research conducted by our students, even (or especially!) undergraduate students, is ethical and safe. However, out of this process, three issues have come up on which we would welcome input, particularly as these do not necessarily fit with the guidelines set out by the BPS. These are the issue of withdrawal of data, the issue of confidentiality in qualitative research, and the notion of not requiring undergraduate students conducting their final year projects to undergo Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checks.

In terms of withdrawal of data (and this applies to both student and staff research), the BPS recommends that participants are allowed to withdraw their data at any time. In terms of internet-mediated research (IMR) there is simultaneously, however, some inconsistent BPS advice. For IMR it seems to be acceptable that once participants have submitted their completed internet-based survey (i.e. by clicking on this button . . .) they also accept that they *cannot* withdraw their data. We have never been comfortable with the notion that IMR inevitably means withdrawal rights disappear. Instead over the last two years, our ERC has come to the decision that a cooling-off period is appropriate for most types of research; including IMR. In order to allow withdrawal for IMR we recommend that participants are asked to give a unique identifier; which they can later mail and cite in order to identify their data for withdrawal. A further problem related to withdrawal

from student research appears when small samples are used (usually but not always involving qualitative methods). Imagine a situation where a student has carried out a case study of a single individual involving a diary method. If this participant is allowed to withdraw at any time and chooses to do so shortly before the project submission date then the student is effectively left without a project. Because of the possibility of situations such as this we advise students conducting small sample research to give a cut off date after which withdrawal could not normally take place (but before which withdrawal is possible – the cooling off period). This cooling off period allows participants the opportunity to withdraw their data should they wish to, but also enables researchers/students the time to collect more data to replace the withdrawn data. If participants wish to withdraw their data *after* the cooling off period then their data would be withdrawn from public dissemination of the work (for example, if the project went into the library, or if a paper was written from the project), however it would still be included in the student's submission for assessment. We do have a little unease at this slight 'bending' of the full right to withdrawal at any time, however, we feel that this is legitimate and occurs in the interest of the student's required submission of their project. If anyone has alternative solutions to this problem we would be very glad to hear of them.

The second issue relates to assurances given regarding confidentiality of data. For quantitative work this is very straightforward as individual data is rarely reported. However, in qualitative work the inclusion of direct verbatim excerpts from an individual participant's data is almost inevitable. In such cases assurances of confidentiality are therefore inappropriate. Instead our students are advised to inform prospective participants that confidentiality *cannot* be assured, however anonymity can be, and therefore all identifying information (not just participants' names) will be removed from the data. This differentiation between

confidentiality and anonymity has provided a useful opportunity for students to reflect on the responsibility associated with the guarantees they provide to participants, however we do wonder whether we are being a little over sensitive regarding this issue. We would welcome the views of experienced researchers using qualitative methods as to how they deal with this issue of confidentiality assurances when using verbatim data excerpts.

The final issue relates to CRB checks. The BPS position of *not* requiring these checks relates to the student's human rights, dignity, and privacy. At NTU, however, the University policy is to require CRB checks whenever research is carried out with vulnerable populations, in order to safeguard participants (and, presumably, the University!). Thus, we have been in something of a dilemma as to how to simultaneously guard students' privacy and human rights (in line with the BPS position) and still fulfil the University's requirements. One solution would be to simply restrict the range of populations we allow our students to work with; however for obvious reasons we do not wish to do this. Instead we have developed a process whereby students are first given explicit information as to what circumstances would require them to undergo a CRB check (i.e. when they choose to undertake their research on vulnerable populations), and

what would happen with the results of their check etc. This means they can then make an informed decision when choosing their research topic in relation to whether they are prepared to undergo a CRB check. If, in that knowledge, they then continue with a project using a vulnerable population then their CRB results go to a small panel of people *not* involved with Psychology and who can then act as independent adjudicators. The panel has been drawn from members of the Division of Social Work, who have considerable experience with CRB checks and are not involved in any way with teaching psychology students. This therefore maintains students' privacy as far as we are able within our University's policy's constraints. This is the only solution we have been able to reach as the University is unmoveable with its requirements for CRB checks. Again we would be interested to hear if there are others in the position where their University's requirements are in direct opposition to those of the BPS and, if this is the case elsewhere, we would be glad to know of ways in which others have dealt with this dilemma.

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### **References**

- Foot, H.C. (2006). Student Research and Ethics. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 12 (1), 82–86.