

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

Business, Environment and Social Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Ethical issues related to students recruiting respondents from their peers

Many students use their social networks to recruit respondents for small informal research projects. Some students also do this for their final year dissertation. While recruiting research participants from people you know can provide positive and productive ways to collect data, there are ethical issues associated with this, which you may not have thought about. Here are some of the kinds of challenges that arise:

- **Anonymity (and Pseudonymity):** if you recruit friends or family members directly, or recruit through social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, it may be very difficult to protect the identity of your respondents. If someone that you know reads the piece of work that you produce it could be that they can quickly identify someone you have talked to just by their descriptor (e.g. 47-year-old woman from Manchester). If the person agreed to participate in your research in a public place (e.g. when others were listening or on Facebook) it will be very difficult to ensure their anonymity. You need to make your respondents aware of this when you ask for their data.
- **Confidentiality:** If you have recruited in a public way, including through Facebook or other social media, and someone has said that they will talk to you in front of others, it will be difficult to maintain confidentiality in relation to their contribution. You need to think carefully before telling someone that their contribution is confidential.
- **Intermediaries:** if you ask a friend to ask their friends or family to be involved in your study, they may find it hard to refuse (see next point) and you need to make sure that your 'intermediary' makes it clear that the research is optional. Your intermediary is also likely to be able to identify their friends or family. This makes it very difficult for you to anonymise your data or to make it confidential. If you recruit by 'snowball sampling' in this way you will need to explain the anonymity and confidentiality risks to the person that you are researching.
- **Consent:** If you ask your family and friends to be involved in your research, they may find it difficult to say no, even if they do not really want to participate. For instance, a close family member has a big stake in you completing your degree, and as such may feel uncomfortable in refusing to be involved. This puts them in a vulnerable position with regards to the research. It is important to make sure that people are really comfortable with participation and can opt out, even when you know them well.
- If you are researching someone who is a child (16 or under), or that is vulnerable in other ways (e.g. they have a learning difficulty), they are considered to be potentially vulnerable, whether they are your friend or not. You need to seek parental permission for someone 16 or under to be involved in your study (unless you can argue that there is a good reason for this not to happen) even if they are your friend or a member of your family. If one of your friends or family members is vulnerable in other ways you also need to be careful about involving them in your research. You

should talk to your supervisor about involving people under 18, or people who are vulnerable in other ways in your study.

- If you recruit respondents using a social media tool (such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram) you need to remember that this is the equivalent of recruiting someone publicly (unless you do so by private message). This means that it is difficult to promise anonymity and confidentiality to your respondents. You need to be clear about this when engaging in research with them.
- Use of online surveys: If you decide to use an online survey, to comply with the Data Protection Act, then you must ensure that the data are held within the European Economic Area (EEA). So, for example, you must not use [surveymonkey.com](#) or similar which store data in the US. It is recommended that you use [Online Surveys](#) or Qualtrics, which are approved by the University of Leeds. The University provides free accounts for students on approved services, please see [relevant link].

Case studies

- 1) A student wants to use social media to look at online identity and identity representation in social media. He is proposing to use his own Facebook account to recruit participants to observe how they present themselves on social media.
- 2) A student in sports science wants to study participation in sports clubs and is proposing to recruit members of a sports club of which they are a member, to find out about how their involvement in the club improves their well-being. They will run an online questionnaire plus a follow-up series of face to face interviews.

What ethical issues do they need to consider?

Sample answers. In both cases these students are recruiting from their peers and need to consider how they will negotiate potential conflicts arising by relying on existing networks for recruitment for their research projects. There is a conflict between their existing friendships with these individuals and their role as a researcher independently gathering data for their project. The fact that they have existing friendships with these individuals could influence those individuals to take part in their research project, when otherwise they might prefer not to do so. This is an example of the researcher having a dual role – both as researcher and as friend of the participant, and they need to think carefully about how these different aspects can be managed. It would be better to design the research so that participants are recruited independently, rather than relying on your existing networks for recruitment.

The first example also includes the use of social media for recruitment and for the research, where there are additional complexities around seeking consent for use of the material. It would be more appropriate to re-design the research so that other online avenues could be explored, not relying on one's own networks to gather data. When using online research methods, taking consent can be logistically more difficult, as many forums (e.g. chat forums online) have a high turnover of users and it might not be easy to contact them to get consent for the research. People also tend to underestimate the permanency of utterances on the internet – an indelible record of their agreement on social media to take part in the research, and potentially also in some instances, of what has been said. If you are designing an online questionnaire you need to think about accessibility for the questionnaire and data security. In

order to comply with Data Protection legislation personal data must be stored within the European Economic Area, and not, for example in the US.

If you want to use social media for recruitment, you should ensure this is separate to your personal use of social media. For example, you could set up a Facebook page that is separate to your personal Facebook account. This is to help maintain the boundaries between your personal friendships and you as a researcher for your dissertation or final year project. You should discuss these issues with your supervisor and School when designing your project, and further information can be sought from <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/involvingresearchparticipants>. You may also find the online resources available in the Minerva in the Researching People module useful, you can find details about signing up for these at <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-dissertations> following the link to “Researching People”.

- 3) A student wants to interview teachers and learners about their educational experiences in schools. She is proposing to use WhatsApp (or a local equivalent such as Wechat) to ask questions and garner answers from participants around the world. These participants will (at least in some cases) be friends, other students, or professional acquaintances such as teachers.

What ethical issues are raised by this?

There are several ethical dilemmas raised here. Consider questions about informed consent, data protection, anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation and the right to withdraw, as well as avoidance of harm. Firstly, the use of social media such as WhatsApp means that the data could be unprotected. Participants might say unguarded or critical things in an apparently casual WhatsApp conversation which they might later regret, or which they do not want others to see. It would be better to use a password-protected medium for this kind of on-line interview. Secondly, using professional acquaintances as participants sets up a number of ethical questions: What if the professional says something critical about his/her employer? How will you protect their identity? What if the professional talks about (and names) colleagues? How will you ensure that such information is kept safe (whilst also retaining the level of detail and incident that make up a good case study)? Thirdly, using friends/other students as participants sets up further ethical dilemmas: How can you ensure that a friend/other student feels able to refuse your request to participate in your study? What if they decide they don't want to continue – how will you ensure their right to withdraw from the study? How can you ensure that their identity is protected, both in terms of the data collection & retention, and in terms of what you write and how you write it?

You should discuss these issues with your supervisor and School when designing your project. Further useful information can be found at www.leeds.ac.uk/ethics

You may also find the online resources available in the Library and Minerva helpful. You can sign up for a session on ‘Researching People’ at <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-dissertations>

- 4) A student in education wants to do a study investigating the experiences of English as an Additional Language (EAL) learners. She currently volunteers as a teaching

assistant in a local school and she intends to ask the learners in her class to participate.

What ethical issues are raised by this?

There are several ethical issues to consider here. Firstly, although it seems a good 'way in', as you will (hopefully) have demonstrated your trustworthiness, you need to think about issues of access, gatekeeping, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, voluntary participation and right to withdraw, as well as avoidance of harm. You would need to discuss your project with all those affected by it (including parents, teachers, head teacher) and ensure that you have their consent. You would need to think about how you convey the aims of the project, and what exactly the participants will be required to do. If English is not their first language, how will you ensure they have understood? There is also a potential power-dynamic at play: students may feel that they cannot refuse you, as you have a (semi-)official role in the school. How will you ensure that their participation is voluntary, and that they know they can withdraw at any time without fear of punishment? Since you are an 'insider-researcher', it will be easy for anyone who knows you and the school to identify the participants – how will you protect their identities? What if the students tell you something negative or critical about the school? What if they tell you of illegal activities (people-trafficking and/or exploitation or abuse) not connected with the school? What procedures will you have in place in case they need help or advice?

You should discuss these issues with your supervisor and School when designing your project. Further useful information can be found at www.leeds.ac.uk/ethics

You may also find the online resources available in the Library and Minerva helpful. You can sign up for a session on 'Researching People' at <https://library.leeds.ac.uk/skills-dissertations>.

Further resources

Further guidance, including template information sheets, consent forms and an example questionnaire introduction: <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/involvingresearchparticipants>

The British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics:

<https://www.bps.org.uk/sites/bps.org.uk/files/Policy/Policy%20-%20Files/BPS%20Code%20of%20Human%20Research%20Ethics.pdf>

University of Leeds Policy on Safeguarding children, young persons and adults in vulnerable circumstances: http://www.leeds.ac.uk/secretariat/documents/safeguarding_policy.pdf

Guidance on involving students as research participants:

http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/download/1013/using_students_as_research_participants

Drs J Hanks, L Middlemiss, A Temple, AREA FREC, May 2017
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