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**Ethical Considerations for Committees, Supervisors, Student Researchers  
Conducting Qualitative Research with Young People in the United Kingdom.**

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# **Ethical Considerations for Committees, Supervisors, Student Researchers Conducting Qualitative Research with Young People in the United Kingdom.**

## **Abstract**

When investigating issues surrounding young people it is necessary to involve them in the discussion of the topic. It is also necessary that the inexperienced or student researcher is equipped with the skills needed to navigate ethical quandaries that may arise. This article considers some of the ethical issues that can arise for novice researchers in institutions that do not have a firmly established qualitative research tradition, with particular reference to research with young people and in some instances sensitive topics. Examples of how the embedding of particular research practices into an ethical framework can navigate these quandaries are made. These include Training & Skills, Recruitment & consent, Breaking the ice, disclosures and endings. Recommendations for updates to ethical procedures for qualitative psychological research are made.

Keywords: Qualitative, Ethics, Young people, Best practice.

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The psychological research community has long been concerned with quantitative data and the objective measurement and generalisation of behaviour. Journals have seemed to prefer research that experimental and objective in nature (Serpa et al., 2020), particularly in the sciences, psychology included. That said, as more qualitative research is being conducted and published by both non-clinical academic staff and students, its recognition is increasing (Freeman, 2018; Kazak, 2018). This brings to light several potential ethical issues. Research with vulnerable groups are particularly suited to the use of qualitative inquiry (Dickson-Swift et al., 2009). Methodologically, this is because it allows for depth and personal experience of the participant to be examined (Fahie, 2014), but the open-ended nature of some qualitative research, for example interviews and focus groups, can lead to unexpected directions in the conversation, which can lead to consideration of ethical issues that are above and beyond what would be considered usual (Hoagwood et al., 2014; Dempsey et al., 2016). Further, qualitative research with young people tends to take place in domains that are frequented by them, for example schools, youth centres and colleges. However, there are positives to exposing young people to the university environment. Many programmes designed to raise the aspirations of young people are taking place around the UK that have been effective through introducing young people to the university environment (Rizzica, 2020). There is a lack of research that directly looks at introducing young people to the university environment through the research process.

In the UK, only those children and young people under the age of 16 are classed as vulnerable for research purposes unless the participant has an added vulnerability (BPS, 2018). However, according to the law a child is anyone under the age of 18 and further, many youth oriented organisations as well as funding bodies identify young people as anyone up to 25 years of age (Munro et al., 2011). The World Health organisation defines a young person as anyone aged 10-24 ("Adolescent health", 2021), the United Nations suggest a youth is aged 15-24 and the UNICEF convention on the rights of the child refer to anyone up to age 18. This paper is situated in the opinion that all young people should be protected and viewed as vulnerable and therefore worthy of added protection and consideration when acting as research participants. That is not to say that some young people will not have added vulnerabilities, but to argue that if these

guidelines are in place for all young participants then we can counteract some of the ethical dilemmas that could arise with all young vulnerable groups.

Students have a tendency to engage in Psychology as a discipline due to an interest in human behaviour and as an outcome of their own life experiences (Huynh, & Rhodes, 2011). This generally lies in areas that are sensitive and prone to sensitive research scenarios. This is reflected when choosing a topic for dissertations and final year projects. Students also have a tendency to prefer qualitative inquiry some due to misconceptions about what psychology as a discipline is and some due to statistic anxiety and a lack of self-efficacy (Macher et al., 2012; Walker & Brakke, 2017). That said qualitative projects are still underrepresented in final year undergraduate cohorts in the UK (Gibson & Sullivan, 2018). Reasons for this range from supervisors staying within their comfort zone to quantitative methods having a higher prestige and weighting in UK Psychology departments (Wiggins et al., 2015). In some institutions, where qualitative methods are not firmly established, this can cause a problem. Universities in the United Kingdom (UK) tend to have specialities within their Psychology departments. For some, this could mean that student researchers are running research projects with a lack of experienced support. The ethical application process has the potential to counteract some of the problems that can occur under these circumstances.

Although young people are increasingly taking part in research (Afolabi et al., 2018; Casale et al., 2019), they can be hard to reach and engage (Herd, 2014). Due to this, the flexibility inherent to qualitative methods enables a rapport and a relationship of trust to be built (Nolan, 2017) and so is preferable to more traditional scientific methods. This paper will cover some key factors which could lead to harm for younger participants, particularly when the researcher is a student or less experienced. For example, the power dynamic present both during recruitment and in the research environment, dealing with disclosure and finally the management of endings. Handling these issues well requires training that student researchers and, quite often, their academic supervisors do not have. At worst, these issues could cause harm to vulnerable participants and, at best, cause ethical dilemmas for unskilled student researchers and further their supervisors. This paper does not aim to argue that such research should not be engaged in, but suggests some ways in which the process, in some institutions, could

be more ethically sound. This is not only for the protection of the participant and the student researcher, but also to reflect the duty of care that an academic supervisor, and psychology as a discipline, has to both parties.

## **1. Study preparation**

The importance of running ethically sound research is well known (Tribe & Morrissey, 2020). From the conception of the study, ethical considerations should be paramount and ongoing. The researcher is responsible for the consideration of all eventualities and more importantly the avoidance of harm. There is a risk of preparation neglect. In terms of academic supervisors, entrenched views, and a propensity to rely on well-established ethical protocols may lead to stagnation; while other aspects of research are rigorously kept current, considerations of contemporary interview techniques may be overlooked. Similarly, supervision of research students in Higher Education may rightly focus on the safety and confidentiality of participants, while failing to explore the student researcher's understanding of qualitative methodology and the pastoral skills required to safely engage in the discussion of sensitive topics.

**1.1 Ethical Clearance for Qualitative Projects.** Student researchers can suffer anxiety and a feeling of being overwhelmed and emotional when completing ethical applications (Brindley et al., 2020). Partly for this reason, it can be tempting to use a 'template' that has been used successfully for previous applications in order to get through the process as smoothly and as quickly as possible. This is especially true in terms of the brief/consent form and debrief. However, in doing this the researcher is opening themselves to making a passive application, rather than an active one. Risk decisions have been shown to be negatively impacted by making passive decisions (Pan et al., 2019). Therefore, instilling the principles of active decision making regarding their research study could go somewhat towards protecting both the participants and the student.

As an example, a tried and tested way to gain ethical approval for research on sensitive topics through an ethical committee is to not address the trauma directly. That is, by suggesting that participants will not be asked to visit personal experience/trauma. However, in a qualitative study that has voluntary participation, the likelihood is that the participants will discuss said trauma, as that is what drew them to the study in the first

place. This needs to be consciously dealt with before the study begins: what will the researcher do if this trauma is brought up in the room? Omitting this consideration can not only cause harm to the participant but also leave student researchers vulnerable.

**1.2 Upskilling and Training.** A lack of supervisors that are adequately skilled in qualitative research methods and a lack of teaching on this topic has been put forward as a reason for the underuse of this methodology (Wiggins et al., 2016). Although the publication of qualitative research has increased, there is no evidence that the skills of academic supervisors have increased. Qualitative research requires a different set of skills than that of an experimental method. Further, qualitative research with vulnerable groups requires skills above and beyond that of normative qualitative research.

In terms of front line practitioners, E.G. Social workers, youth workers etc, there are specific training outcomes that need to be undertaken before working with children, young people and vulnerable adults, for example, safeguarding and child protection training. Further to this, professionals working with young peoples in the community receive regular supervision to offer a safe space to reflect or/and debrief in to promote their well-being. Supervisors and students need to recognise where their skill set ends and what gaps in their knowledge and training need to be filled to successfully (and safely) run a research project with vulnerable groups. This needs to be discussed early in the design stage. There are various skills that could be useful to an academic researcher working with vulnerable groups. The academic setting is the ideal environment to practise qualitative research skills. Role playing can encourage confidence building, further this could take place within the learning environment in terms of research methods training.

**1.3 Recruitment and Consent.** Although young peoples can make informed decisions about research participation there are considerations that go above and beyond the signing of a piece of paper (Afolabi et al., 2018). The British Psychological Society (2014) classes young peoples under the age of 16 as vulnerable, and research with these groups is frequently conducted through a gate keeper (Singh & Wassenaar, 2016). This could be a teacher, youth worker or any individual who has access to young people on a regular basis. This potentially brings about a few issues. Firstly, that of power; the gatekeeping individual is normally in a position of power over the young people and

therefore it can be difficult for the young people to voice their opinion and refuse to participate if they so wish. This inevitably effects the perception of voluntary participation. Beyond this however, young people have a high fear of missing out (Beyens et al., 2016). If their peers are taking part, then there is an unconscious pressure to take part also and so the issue of consent must also be an active one.

If parental consent has been obtained, this does not mean that the young person should not give their own consent. Further, the young person can be just as unlikely to voice their uncomfortableness as a child participant. It is the researcher's responsibility to be aware of signals that can be both verbal and non-verbal, that could suggest dissent, that a young people is feeling overwhelmed/upset or uncomfortable, and that the study should not proceed any further. Young people have been shown to enjoy the research process, however, even when told about the risks of taking part can forget the risks or even not recall being told about them initially (Simons-Rudolph et al., 2020). Extended discussions around consent and reinforcement throughout the research has been shown to help with the retention of the risks associated with taking part (Addissie et al., 2016; Kass et al., 2015).

## **2. During the active research process**

For student/inexperienced researchers, due to the way in which ethical clearance is sought and time constraints on projects, ethical considerations are in danger of becoming a distant memory once clearance is achieved. For some, quantitative driven, experimental research, this can be less risky than when using qualitative methods. When student researchers are using qualitative methods with vulnerable groups, it is imperative that the importance of ethical underpinnings, being active and revisited throughout, is reinforced. This is the supervisors responsibility to oversee and can be achieved through a regular supervision action plan that can be laid out in the ethical application process and being followed throughout the project.

**2.1 Putting Young peoples at Ease in the Research Environment.** Although the benefits of young people visiting a university campus have been shown, a typical university research setting can be a cold, rigid and sometimes an anxiety-inducing environment. Using qualitative inquiry could mitigate these effects, but this is highly dependent upon the primary researcher's interpersonal skills. For young people, being



outside of their comfort zones can add to a state of anxiety that may be present even when taking part voluntarily. Therefore, heightened anxiety can affect the quality of contributions made to the discourse and, by extension, the validity of the research. It is necessary to put them at their ease as early in the research relationship as possible.

The voices of young people are needed in order to represent their viewpoints (Collins et al., 2018). Qualitative research with young people requires the young people to be active participants. This means, among other things, engaging them in the topic, empowering them to voice their opinions and validating what we hear from them. In order to achieve this the researcher cannot be an outsider looking in. This can mean, allowing the young participants to drive the session in its own direction and using their own comments as cues for further depth. For a student researcher this can cause anxiety and trepidation that could become apparent to young people during the course of the session. A good primary researcher will have the skills to rapidly put young peoples at ease in the research situation. This can be done through the affirmation of it being a safe space and the building of a relationship of mutual trust from the very beginning of contact (Dempsey et al., 2016). Further, showing interest in what participants are saying and paraphrasing back to them in order to show attentiveness will increase the likelihood of in-depth interaction (Dempsey et al., 2016). These skills can be practised with the supervisor or with peers during formal qualitative method training.

There is always a tension between the participant and researcher that needs to be overcome at the start of any research study; this is particularly true in qualitative research. Trust needs to be built and suspicions about the purpose of the research dispelled (Dixon, 2015). When running qualitative research with young peoples it becomes increasingly important to break the ice in such a way that not only lowers these barriers but also increases confidence and trust in the researcher. Building an ethically sound reciprocal relationship through researcher disclosure is an ideal way of doing this. This section advises the student researcher to build rapport with the young people it should be noted that this needs to be done with caution. The building of rapport and discussion into a research study can easily be swayed into ‘putting words into the participant’s mouths’ or manipulating the outcome of the study. Therefore a simple ice breaker task can induce a positive environment, built on rapport, created without detriment to the research study.

**2.2 An Example Ice Breaker “Do you know someone who” bingo.** As an ex youth support worker, I often utilise a technique that has proven positive with groups of young people before. A grid is created with six behaviours on it, four of which could be deemed as anti-social/illegal, and a further two that could be deemed prosocial. The theme of this task can be manipulated based on the researcher’s interests, but it is always advisable to keep it interesting and relevant to young people. Young people are then asked to indicate if they have known someone who had taken part in the behaviours listed on the grid. In order to increase trust and begin a mutually respectful relationship with participants, I and often a secondary researcher will take part in the activity. This leads to open and honest conversations, with voluntary disclosure from both the participants and researchers. As previously evidenced in research, disclosure of personal details leads to trust and the acknowledgement of similar experiences can equalise a power imbalance in a relationship (Dumbrill, 2006; Strickler, 2009). That said, there is a tradition in a relationship that involves a power indifference, that no personal details be shared by the people in the position of power (Sunderani & Moodley 2020). Utilising a game such as this, however, enables the sharing of personal details without putting the researcher at risk or crossing boundaries. Again, this was a skill learnt whilst working in the community and not something that was formally trained. However, it would be relatively easy to teach student researchers how to use tools such as this to engage with young people in the research setting.

### **3. Qualitative Research as Therapy**

The therapeutic effects of qualitative methodologies have been recognised both in longitudinal psychological and social care research (Lohani et al., 2018; Rossetto, 2014; Shamai, 2003). It should be remembered that participants bring their own agenda to the study and may take the opportunity to be heard, particularly when they do not feel this way in their everyday lives. For student researchers this could cause a number of issues that could be mitigated with the necessary skill set. For instance, it is difficult to interrupt someone who is telling their story. The chances of this being needed are reduced by keeping the discourse on topic. This is a necessary skill in most qualitative methods and can help to avoid situations where the student feels out of their depth but it is a skill that is developed through practise. That being said, it is important to remind student researchers that not only do they bring their own life experience, values, beliefs

and agenda to the research setting, but that they have a responsibility to allow the young person to shape the session. How much this happens will vary by approach. This further highlights the need for confidence building exercises, such as through role-playing, for student researchers. This could be done on a one to one basis with the supervisor, or incorporated into formal learning in terms of the dissertation module. It is important to remind student researchers however, that disclosure can still occur, no matter how prepared and trained the researcher is.

**3.1 Dealing with Disclosure.** Competence is one of the four core ethical principles set out by the British Psychological Society in its code of ethics and conduct (BPS, 2018). They outline that:

“Psychologists, **whether academic**, practitioner or in training, may offer a range of services that usually require specialist knowledge, training, skill and experience. Competence refers to their ability to provide those specific services to a requisite professional standard. A psychologist should not provide professional services that are outside their areas of knowledge, skill, training and experience.”

This value is particularly important in terms of disclosure on the part of vulnerable participants. Practitioner researchers are bound by policies that require the researcher to pass information on regarding disclosure to a manager (Masson, 2004). Academic and student researchers however do not have such clear-cut guidelines (Wiles et al., 2008). Competency of student researchers is the responsibility of the supervisor. This does not necessarily have to be competency in qualitative research methods per se. This could be past experience evidence through employment, qualifications, training or indeed evidence of competency through the gaining of marks on research methods modules that include qualitative element. Disclosure can be a very real issue for student psychology researchers who may be unaware of the procedure to follow or indeed whether they can break confidentiality. This lack of skills puts both them and the participant at risk of harm. When conducting qualitative research either with vulnerable groups the chances of a participant making a disclosure are heightened due to the opportunistic nature of some disclosures (Morrison et al., 2018). There is a high chance that academic researchers, particularly students, are not trained in child protection or aware of the safeguarding policy of the institution. This could be construed as putting

participants in harm's way. The supervisor therefore, is responsible for ensuring that the student researcher is aware of such policies and training and where to find them.

When a young person makes a disclosure for the first time it is important that this be met with an appropriate response, otherwise, this can have detrimental effects on the participant (Crisma et al., 2004). Again, there is a difference in support/training for those professionals working directly with young people in the community. The expectations and boundaries are clearly set out and revisited particularly those around safeguarding and disclosures and how this information may be shared. Academia can learn from other disciplines by employing some of the same methods when dealing with disclosure.

It is paramount that student researchers are coached to state one's position at the outset and to explain the nature of disclosures that would make it necessary for the researcher to break confidentiality (Surmiak, 2019). This technique is used in therapy services, social work (Schelbe et al., 2015) and youth work (Confidentiality and Data Protection, 2020) and is robust. Even with this in place however, disclosure can still occur in the research setting due to unintentional disclosures being common in adolescence (Thulin et al., 2020) and the warmth of the relationship felt by young peoples in the research environment (Tilleczek, 2019). When this happens a student researcher can reiterate their position and discuss breaking confidentiality with the participant, alternatively they can signpost the participant to services that can help them effectively. Again, the anxiety of this situation on a student researcher can be offset somewhat by the use of role-playing and confidence building in the student/supervisor relationship prior to the research taking place.

**3.2 The Importance of Managing Endings.** A qualitative study can be reflective of a therapeutic relationship. As such, the ending of the interview/focus group is part of the therapeutic process and should be managed as such. Although always an important aspect of research with human participants, the closure of the study is even more important when working with young people (Dempsey et al., 2016). Academic researchers are not usually trained in developing the ending phase of a research study. An example of this is signposting participants implicitly by way of the debrief. Sometimes this signposting is to an obscure agency that the young person/vulnerable

participant may not have engaged with before. This not only defers the responsibility of ensuring no harm, to the young person but it risks being overlooked by this age group altogether.

When students researchers use qualitative methodology, particularly with young people, endings become just as important as they are in the therapeutic relationship. This should be discussed and planned for by both the student and supervisor ahead of time and evidenced within the ethical application form. It is imperative to remember that endings in any relationship are important but for young people these should be meaningful and final (Della Rosa & Midgley, 2017). It is also just as important to remember that professionals are not immune to feelings about endings (Özabacı et al., 2020). In this setting, the professional is the student researcher. It is the academic supervisor's responsibility to ensure that the student researcher is also mentally and emotionally healthy at the end of the research study. Therefore, the student researcher would also benefit from a planned for ending.

Academic researchers can learn how to manage this by again looking to other disciplines. Planning for the ending of the session during the ethical application can be helpful in putting student researchers in a more confident position when entering their research study. In disciplines such as social care and in psychology in practice there is evidence that talking about endings from the beginning allows for more control over the session (Wylie & Mac Dermott 2017; Webb et al., 2019) and prepares the participant for what otherwise could be perceived and felt as an abrupt and unexpected cut off (Wylie & Mac Dermott, 2017). Just like the clearly defined timeline of some therapeutic relationships, the time restriction on a qualitative study can help with the ending as it is a clearly defined end point (Webb, 2019). As an academic researcher, the way that the ending is managed is personal (Dempsey et al., 2018) but it may be necessary to sign post to other agencies or indeed check in on a participant later. Researchers should make this clear both verbally and on the debrief sheet. Student researchers will inevitably need encouragement and guidance on this from their supervisor. Ideally, when young people are asked for their opinion, it would encourage them to be listened to and have their opinion acted upon. However, this will depend entirely on the type of research project and the life span of it. The student may inevitably move on before the research project comes to any formal fruition and therefore the supervisor would be the

one to deal with this issue. This factor could be decided by both the supervisor and the student together at the conceptualisation of the project.

**3.3 Closing Activity to Lighten Mood.** As an example of a planned activity to end a qualitative study. At the outset of each study, participants can be informed that a group activity will take place at the end of the group. The purpose of this activity is not only to lighten the mood but also to signal the end of the study. An example of such an activity could be the use of flip chart paper. Participants can be asked to list/write anything that the researcher sees fit. Whilst doing this, conversations flow more easily and can be steered away from the research topic if necessary. Young people become more open, visibly more relaxed and less formal. This can ensure that the participants are leaving the room in a similar mind frame to when they entered. Which is the responsibility of all academic researchers.

**4. Recommendations** Include a specialist section on the institution/faculty ethical application form to be completed for studies involving qualitative research. Further, for students of psychology, this section should be worked through and discussed with their academic supervisor as part of the dissertation process. The following sections could be included:

- Evidence of an adequate Supervision plan. This should be detailed and specific. To include dates of meetings that should be after each interview/focus group. This is to debrief, make known any safe guarding or child protection issues and for the supervisor to ensure that the student researcher has not been impacted in a negative way by the session.
- Evidence of competency. To include evidence that the primary researcher has the skills and training to carry out the research study safely and professionally. Further, how any gaps identified in the primary researchers' skills and training will be filled. For example through formal learning on module material or through training by the supervisor if they have the skills needed and can pass them on.
- Evidence that there is a plan in existence for any incidence of a disclosure or a safeguarding issue to include a clear policy of reporting any concerns and to whom.

- Evidence that the ending of each interview/group has been thought about and planned. Further, evidence of how the endings will be managed.
- Educating UK university ethics committees to look for these specific points in ethical applications and to return any that do not have these in place.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between researcher and young people who are research participants can throw up several concerns. The responsibility for how these concerns are dealt with lie solely with the primary researcher, or if a student, the supervisor. The purpose of this paper is not to suggest that students do not run qualitative research or research with vulnerable participants, rather it is to draw attention to some of the more complex ethical issues that this can bring about and, more importantly, suggest ways to mitigate these, both before the study begins and throughout.

Considerations such as those highlighted in this report can be counteracted by viewing ethics as a dynamic process and by both student researcher and supervisor taking personal responsibility. Psychology as a discipline can usefully learn from collaborative and cross disciplinary approaches to the ethical process. Everyone involved with a research project that involves children/young people and/or sensitive topics is responsible for the ethically sound running of said project, not merely in completing an ethical application form, but in considering ethical practice as an ongoing dynamic process throughout.

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