Advanced Research Methods in Counselling (ECAC7004) Assignment 1

Research Ethics related to three research methods

QUESTIONNAIRES, INTERVIEWS & FOCUS GROUPS

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Hello everyone. Welcome to this brief presentation on research ethics related to three research methods: questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups,

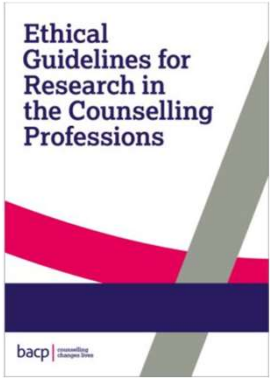
Presentation Objectives

- Explore ethics in relation to the professional research requirements for three commonly used research methods: Questionnaires, Interviews and Focus groups.
- Illustrate how each method raises specific areas of consideration, and that each method raises incrementally more complex issues.
- Distinguish when procedural ethics are useful and necessary and highlight times when a more personal and psychologically engaged form of ethics is required.
- Consider all the above in relation to counselling practice.

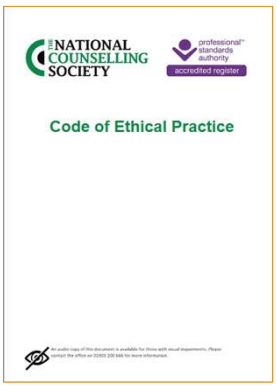
I just want to quickly show you my objectives for this presentation. You can see them there, but I won't linger too long so we can get into the real issues. I want to draw your attention to one in particular though. I'm keen to illustrate that procedural ethics are useful and necessary, but also highlight times when a more personal and psychologically engaged form of ethics is required.

Ethical Principles

The principles are established in guidance



BACP, 2019



NCS, 2015

UWTSD, 2023

Important ethical principles are established in guidance, and I want to illustrate here three main sources of guidance that are particularly relevant to now. We have here the BACP (2019) Document, The National Counselling Society (2015) Code of Ethics which includes guidance for researchers and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Research Ethics and Integrity Code of Conduct (2023). All the documents refer to a central core of concepts that are fundamental to research.

Research Principles – To do NO harm!

- **Respect**
- Informed Consent
- Beneficence
- Autonomy
- Justice & Inclusion
- Care &
- Trustworthyness
- Privacy and Confidentiality
- Integrity and Honesty
- Safety
- Rigour
- Compliance with Laws and Regulations
  - Including, but not limited to, Professional Guidance (NCS, 2015; BACP, 2019) Institutional Requirements (UWTSD, 2022) The Data Protection Act (2018) and specifically UWTSD's Research Data Management Policy (2022b)

(NCS, 2015; BACP, 2019; UWTSD, 2023; Braun & Clarke, 2013)

All these concepts can all be identified within the documents I've mentioned, as well as academic literature such as Braun and Clarke (2013), At the top I've placed respect, and indeed Millum and Bromwich (2022) state that it is widely recognised that respect for the person is the primary driver of research ethics. All these concepts have to be considered when conducting research and when we get into the three methods and we shall see how they become relevant.

"human beings were "mere objects" or a "series of biological events" or "mail packages." Leibbrandt testified that this view originated with the publication in 1920 of an influential book, Die Freigabe der Vernichtung Lebensunwerten Lebens (Permission to Destroy Life Unworthy of Life) by the jurist Karl Binding and the psychiatrist Alfred E. Hoche. These authors coined the concept of "life un-worthy of life" that justified its "destruction" as a "healing act" for the health of the German nation. Binding stated that the doctor's responsibility was to terminate the lives of those who were mentally ill, deformed, or socially useless." Through this thought process it became possible not to **recognise**, or **respect** a fundamental human right to exist.

Shuster, 2018

But first I want to remind ourselves about how we got here. This is a quotation from Shuster (2018) that I have edged in Black. This was part of an examination of the Nuremburg Trials. He highlights how the language of fascism reduced human beings to "a series of Biological events," "mere objects" or "mail Packages." He recalls how in 1920 a book, entitled *Permission to Destroy Life Unworthy of Life* was published by an eminent Lawyer and a respected psychiatrist. They argued that some people were undeserving of life and could therefore be euthanised. That book was recognised at The Nuremburg trial as a precursor to Nazi ideology. Schuster states that "through this thought process it became possible not to recognise or respect the fundamental human right to exist."

The "Ethics Form" or the "Form of Ethics"

Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

PG2 / E1 FORM

APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL APPROVAL

RESEARCH STUDENTS
This form is to be completed by the student within **SIX** months for full-time students and **TWELVE** months for part time students, after the commencement of the research degree or following progression to Part Two of your course.

Once complete, submit this form via the ***MyTSD Doctoral College Portal*** at (https://mytsd.uwtsd.ac.uk).

This document is also available in Welsh.

RESEARCH STAFF ONLY
All communications relating to this application during its processing must be in writing and emailed to psresearch@uwtsd.ac.uk , with the title 'Ethical Approval' followed by your name.

STUDENTS ON UNDERGRADUATE OR TAUGHT MASTERS PROGRAMMES should submit this form (and receive the outcome) via systems explained to you by the supervisor/module leader.

In order for research to result in benefit and minimise risk of harm, it must be conducted ethically. A researcher may not be covered by the University's insurance if ethical approval has not been obtained prior to commencement.

The University follows the OECD Frascati manual definition of **research activity**: "creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications". As such this covers activities undertaken by members of staff, postgraduate research students, and both taught postgraduate and undergraduate students working on dissertations/projects.

The individual undertaking the research activity is known as the "principal researcher".

Ethical approval is not required for routine audits, performance reviews, quality assurance studies, testing within normal educational requirements, and literary or artistic criticism.

Please read the notes for guidance before completing ALL sections of the form.

This form must be completed and approved prior to undertaking any research activity. Please see Checklist for details of process for different categories of application.

What kind of ethics?

"Proceedural ethics has achieved dominance within the changing legal and political context in which research is undertaken" (Pollock 2012)

The form of respect:

Appraisal Respect or Recognition Respect (London,2021)

London points out that **respect has multiple understandings, he contrasts Appraisal respect (respect given because of someone's positive qualities) with Recognition respect: Respecting others on the basis of our own shared human rights and responsibility to others.**

We might, as researchers, be seeking appraisal respect while completing the form, but our research practice is embedded within **Recognition** Respect: every one's right to be respected.

I include this because in the process of exploring these three methods it was easy to become preoccupied with the Ethics Form, and not the Form of Ethics, This a theme picked up by Pollock (2012) in the quotation. Pollock goes on to say we can get fixated on meeting the requirements for ethical approval, but this does not guarantee respect in the practice of research. It led me to consider the nature of respect. London (2021) identifies two forms of respect: Appraisal respect is respect given to another because of their subjectively identified positive qualities, but Recognition respect is Respecting others purely and objectively on the basis of our own shared human rights and responsibility to each other. It was Appraisal Respect that led to horrific experimentation on human subjects in the 1940's, but it was Recognition Respect that led to the Nuremburg Code (in BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL, 1996).

It's easy to get caught up in appraisal respect that is based on whether we think others have the right qualities, and I am acutely aware of being pulled into this myself as I consider my own desire to be respected as student researcher. I will after all be seeking respect from a research ethics panel and I will be pulled towards judging my own worth in light of their appraisal of me. It reminds me all the more not be overly seduced by this unintended consequence of Procedural ethics.

Methods

So onto the methods. Bearing all that in mind we will start by discussing some required and necessary procedural issues.

Common Ethical Procedures

	Information for participants:	YES	NO	N/A
13	Will you describe the main research procedures to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	☐	☐	☐
14	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	☐	☐	☐
15	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	☐	☐	☐
16	Will you explain to participants that refusal to participate in the research will not affect their treatment or education (if relevant)?	☐	☐	☐
17	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	☐	☐	☐
18	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	☐	☐	☐
19	With questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?	☐	☐	☐
20	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	☐	☐	☐
21	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation, in a way appropriate to the type of research undertaken?	☐	☐	☐
22	If NO to any of above questions, please give an explanation			

UWTSD, 2022

University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Ethics Form (2022a) points to the common requirements for all the methods. It ask us to consider, confirm, or justify specific aspects of the research design. A lot of this is about what we will communicate to the participants, and as you can see, within the specific questions on the slide there are implied, yet solid, principles of respect, honesty, informed consent, care, and doing no harm.

The Invisible Researcher

QUESTIONNAIRES

There is an idea that for questionnaires the researcher is invisible, and this is the way to avoid all the messy complicated stuff that I shall talk about later. We can remove all those human complications that researchers bring to the process. What is left will be unsullied data about the issue in question.

Invisible isn't harm free

"The first ethical objective is to ensure that completing the survey will cause minimal emotional, mental, social or economic harm to the respondent due to asking personally invasive, culturally sensitive or controversial information that might embarrass or upset respondents."

(Arundel, 2023).

Evans et al, (2002). Research into Service user experience of Breast Screening

An ethically simple piece of follow-up research for women who attended Breast Screening resulted in high levels of anxiety and distress for four women and feelings of guilt in the researcher.

Braun and Clarke (2013) enthusiastically state that questionnaires are ideal for students and suited to research sensitive topics, because they offer privacy and anonymity to the participants, but clearly, as this slide shows, Researcher Invisibility does not mean harm free.

Arundel (2023) tells us that: "The first ethical objective is to ensure that completing the survey will cause minimal emotional, mental, social or economic harm to the respondent."

An example of this happening with a questionnaire is given by Evans et al, (2002). An ethically simple piece of follow-up research for women who attended Breast Screening resulted in high levels of anxiety and distress for four women and feelings of guilt in the researcher. Perhaps even with questionnaires we are not as distant as we might think we are.

Questionnaires - Things to consider

Questionnaire Design: Clear, relevant and understandable?

Pilot Testing: Do I have any idea of what happens when I ask this?

Sampling: Is it reflective of the research goals, appropriate? inclusive? Sensitive? Done with care?

Have we considered the most appropriate Data Collection Methods:

- Self administered?
- Online, alone, or in-person with the researcher?

Things to consider when we when we use questionnaires in research. Are we thinking about accessibility and inclusion when we design the questionnaire? Are questions clear and relevant? From a "do no harm" perspective do we have any idea of what happens when a participant reads a question? We might need to consider whether we need to pilot the questionnaire to ensure that it is as safe as possible. Does our sampling have integrity so that that it is reflective of the research aims? Is it, appropriate, inclusive, sensitive and done with care, and have we considered the most appropriate way of facilitating questionnaire completion, would it be self-administered, delivered online, when the person is alone or with a researcher present?

Managing the risks of questionnaires

Evan's et al (2002) teaches us to remember that the participant is unsupported and alone so:

- Do more to predict potential harms from the outset
- Make your risk assessment specific to the issue that is being explored, as well as
- consider wider issues that participants might be experiencing: health issues, (including mental health issues) are emotive topics, and clients are unsupported and alone when faced with the questions presented.

Ensure that appropriate support exists if it is needed once the questionnaire is completed.

- Sources of further information
- Availability of other support agencies

Debriefing, in a form appropriate, not just to the research topic, but issues that may arise from the research topic is available.

I mentioned earlier Evans' article which told us about questionnaire research going wrong. The article teaches us to remember that the participant is often unsupported and alone, so it is incumbent upon us to do more to prevent potential harms from the outset. Our risk assessment should be specific to the issue that is being explored and we need to consider wider issues that participants might be experiencing. Health issues, including mental health issues, are emotive topics and clients may be unsupported and alone when faced with the questions presented. We need to ensure that appropriate support exists if it's needed once the questionnaire is completed, and that debriefing in a form appropriate is available, Debriefing might just not be limited to the research topic but might need to respond to issues that may arise from the research topic

Hello, I'm your Researcher.

INTERVIEWS

But when interviews are used a living person enters into a relationship with another person for the purpose of research.

Our Ethical Presence – Becoming the interviewer, becoming more Relational.

"a great deal is provided by this personal contact. You are another human being and interviewees will respond to you, in bodily presence, an entirely different way from the way they would have reacted to questionnaires." (Thomas, 2023)

"attention to the unequalness of the researcher/participant relationship, and the closeness of the social interaction: complicated relational matters are present" (Jackson, 2021)

Bergum and Dossetor's, in their (2020) suggested that question is at the root of Relational Ethics:

How to we ensure that "a belief that all people are morally equal" is reflected in our practice?

Thomas (2023) points out the advantages of human interaction in interviews. It provides, he says, "support, you are more likely to get responses, and people will feel that they want to help and give their opinions to you, you will be able to watch and listen for nuances which will give you important clues about how they feel about the topic". Whilst this may be true Jackson (2021) points out that in addition complex relational matters are also present In interviews. For Bergum and Dossetor (2020) the question that this relationship brings is one of relational ethics: how to ensure that "a belief that all people are morally equal" is reflected in our practice? There is now no procedural questionnaire to hide behind.

Ethical Issues in interviewing – a literature review (Allmark et al 2009)

Ethical Issue	Problems identifies in literature	Suggested Mitigation in Literature
Privacy	There is a danger of voyeurism and the temptation to focus on the most sensational elements of a study and to pick sensational phenomena to study	Nothing in the literature,
Confidentiality	The limits of it, and how hard it is to maintain when the research is narrative	Psydonyms or initials; masking other identifyers, Honesty – it may not be completely possible (!); Being clear from the outset about the legal, social and ethical boundaries.
Informed Consent	About Privacy and confidentiality, and choice to participate or opt out	Continuous or process consent. Seeking approval to continue, being aware of the increasing potential for harm to the participant.

Allmark (2009) and the co-authors of this literature review considered 88 pieces of literature that discussed ethics associated with interviewing.

The first ethical concern they identified was one that of privacy. This literature review revealed a danger of "voyeurism." The interviewer can be drawn to pry into the most sensational aspects of the participant's narrative, and the interviewer's prurience shapes the research. What's very interesting to me is that even though they identified the theme, they found nothing in the literature to help researchers mitigate this.

The literature suggested it is procedurally quite simple to address the concerns about confidentiality in interviews – when reporting use pseudonyms, take care to mask any other identifiers, and if you can't do that, ensure that you have been honest about any limitations from the outset.

And the same with the issue of informed consent. Procedurally ensure that consent is sought at the outset, and kept alive throughout the interview, right through until the very end, respecting the right to withdraw and opt out.

Ethical Issues in interviewing – a literature review (Allmark et al 2009)

Ethical Issue	Problems identifies in literature	Suggested Mitigation in Literature
Harm	The sensitivity of the subject, the risk of speaking out, the potential to unleash, the abuse of power. Harm to the researcher	Personal and group support/supervision reflectiion on the participants level of vulnerability. Training; Awareness; stopping if indicated.
Dual role and over-involvement	Researcher or therapist? Friendly or friend.	Little offered in the literature.
Politics and Power	The power of the counsellor/researcher, one set of skills promising one thing, but not delivering the other. Directing the conversation. Neutrality or taking sides. Reporter or evangelist (Oakley).	???? The Gray areas. Paradigmatic questions.

Literature revealed that the sensitive nature of the subject had a real bearing on the potential for harm. That untrained and unskilled interviewers could encourage too much uncontainable emotion or will push too hard for data. Mitigation for this includes processes and procedures such as Researcher support/ Supervision/ training on reflectiveness and awareness raising.

Dual Role and over-involvement, overlap slightly with issues of Politics and Power, but Allmark found few mitigations in the literature review. The Power of the counsellor/researcher dyad, one hopes is a training issue and governed by professional code of ethics, but handling neutrality, or adopting a political stance is a question of Research Orientation, Paradigms and methodologies, and there seems to be little in the way of Procedural ethics that will guide that.

I hope, in drawing out these issues that we begin to see that the complexities of Interviewing reveals the obvious. That completing the ethics form, only means there is clearance to proceed. But research is much more that a procedural issue. We are in a relationship with it, and we will bring that relationship into the room when we interview research participants.

So many people!

FOCUS GROUPS

And to complicated it further – now there's more than just one participant, as we consider focus groups.

Focus Groups

Increasing Relationality

- Social interaction
- Complex social situations
- Participants can question, challenge, agree, and disagree.
- Topics are elaborated, explained, justified to arrive at a collective making sense.

(Braun & Clarke 2013)

If we look at this slide we might begin to wonder about all this Increased Relationality.

Messy? Uncontrolled? Maybe – but my goodness all that relationality makes it naturalistic and real. And the power shifts. The researcher is outnumbered and discourse reigns! Imagine the richness of data compared to that which a questionnaire reveals.

Focus Group methodology – some ethical challenges: Sim and Waterfield (2019)

Ethical Issue	Problems identified	Suggested Mitigation
Harm	• Communal nature of groups may make it harder for a person to speak out if threatened. • Many unique psychological profiles in the group – not just one. • What is harm to one may be a benefit to another. • Balancing discomfort with harm, and harm from benefit	• Increased vigilance for all participants. • Checking out that that sharing experiences is validating for all participants.
Confidentiality, Anonymity, Privacy.	• What is happening to the data in the focus group? To what extent can a researcher promise this in the moment? How will data be captured, lawfully stored and processed? • Within the group can identity be protected. How will this impact on behaviour and disclosure in the group?	• Distinguish between internal and external confidentiality. Despite group agreements the researcher cannot control the autonomous actions of group members. • Clarity from the outset

I'm going to approach the ethical issues for focus groups in the same way as I did for Interviews and look at a specific paper. This one by Sim and Waterfield (2019).

Harm can come about as indicated. In groups there is pressure to speak when one doesn't wish to, or have a view blocked when you need to speak. There are many different psychological profiles in a group, and then there are questions about whether what may harmful to one is not harmful, or even beneficial to another. There is no simple procedure to follow in these situations. The focus group facilitator is in a relationship with all these aspects. And the ethical responses in the moment will be guided by relational ethics. It is in response to another that we will check out that the research is a validating experience, not because it ticks a box.

Issues of confidentiality, Anonymity and Privacy are now doubly complex. Nothing that is said will be private in that group, we can't promise it in the moment, or protect identity easily. We can do some procedural stuff. We can explicitly distinguish between internal and external confidentiality; we can make group agreements and ask people to sign up to it. We can revisit the agreements at the end of the focus group meeting. But we cannot guarantee that, autonomously, group members will not discuss what has been said by who outside the room. The best we can do is have clarity about this from the outset.

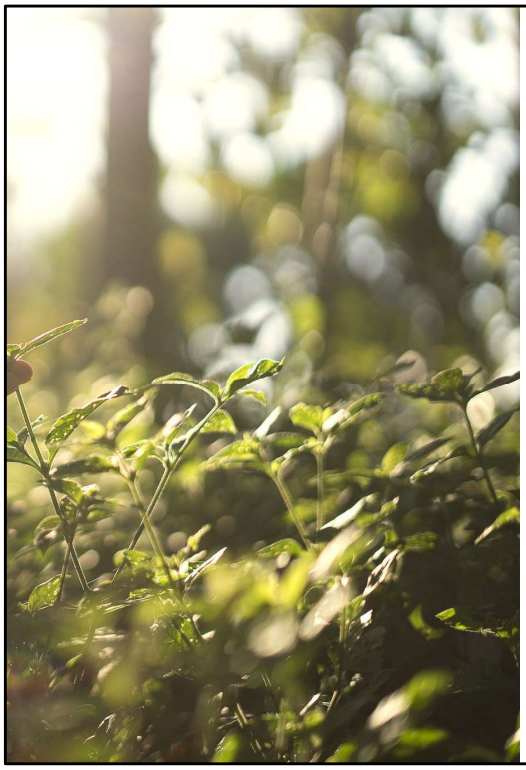
Focus Group methodology – some ethical challenges: Sim and Waterfield (2019)

Ethical Issue	Problems identified	Suggested Mitigation
Consent/autonomy	Qualitative research poses problems: • The data is revealed rather than specified – even more so when discussion is facilitated rather than lead. • Is this a support group? The researcher may not think not, but the participants may experience it as such. – thwarted autonomy is also an issue.	Clarity from the outset, throughout, and on ending about: • Research not Therapy • The search for group themes, not individual expression. • Clarity for withdrawal/data analysis/reporting/what may or may not be excluded.

And the last ethical challenge in focus groups I want to highlight is the issue of Consent and autonomy. In qualitative research we don't know what we will discover, so despite our best efforts what we inform people about before they sign up is limited. It's also harder to divert the discussion away from questions that make some people uncomfortable. Participants and researcher may experience subtle peer pressures and may stay in a discussion longer than they want to.

Sim and Waterfield, point to an important issue for counsellors. This can look like a support group, and the group can make it one, since they can exercise their autonomy, but this is thorny for a researcher and easy for a counsellor get drawn into. Sim and Waterfield point out that it can be hard to meet all the group's members expectations as set out by the research/or as imagined by the group.

The suggested mitigations are about clarity from the outset, throughout and on ending. Clarity about it being research and not therapy, being clear that a focus group is about themes and not individual expression. And being honest about the issues that may arise when consent is withdrawn.



Conclusion

The rich and the wonderful is in the grey areas.

It's been an interesting experience exploring these three methods. I have been compelled to tussle with my dislike of procedures and acknowledge its enduring place in the broad world of mental health practice, therapy, counselling, and now in research. I have always felt that that when human experience is reduced to tick box exercises and committees something rich and wonderful is lost. I have rediscovered that The Rich and Wonderful is in the grey areas, where the remedies are not to be found in procedural ethics, but in remembering the relationality of people.

14.49.

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