

Ethical Issues in Conducting Qualitative Research in Online Communities

1. Introduction

Increasingly, psychologists are extending their research to include online methods of data collection, both quantitative and qualitative. The Internet presents psychologists with opportunities to recruit and collect data from a diverse range of participants, often at cheaper cost than traditional methods; to observe social human behaviour and new social phenomena; to access archival data and to automate procedures (Kraut, Olson, Banaji, Bruckman, Cohen, & Couper, 2004). Online quantitative psychological research typically employs surveys or experiments, where each potential participant makes an active choice to participate in the research (Brownlow & O'Dell, 2002), or 'count' data, where the summary results presented cannot be directly linked to individual participants. Online qualitative psychological research is less common (estimated 4% of all psychological research conducted online, Skitka & Sargis, 2006) than online quantitative research and typically employs variations on traditional methods of data collection such as interviewing, focus groups, participant observation (e.g., in chat rooms and virtual communities) and access to archival data (e.g., webpages, blogs and discussion boards). Online communities may be the focus of the research, or online virtual environments may be used simply as a site for qualitative data collection. Conducting qualitative research online within virtual communities poses unique ethical challenges because of the persistence and 'traceability' (Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012) of quotes, often sensitive content of data and potential impact on both individuals and online communities. The ethical issues may vary according to the purpose of the research, the mode of data collection (active engagement with research participants versus the use of archival data) and the types of virtual environments accessed. It is now a decade since Eysenbach and Till's (2001) seminal article on ethical issues associated with conducting qualitative research within internet communities. At that time, Eysenbach and Till distinguished between 'passive' (use

of existing data without researcher involvement in the online community), ‘active’ (active participation by the researcher in the online community) and ‘traditional’ (where data is generated through interviews or focus groups conducted online) research. While these categories continue to characterise much qualitative research online, increasingly hybrid approaches are being adopted and research expanded into new types of internet communities, further increasing the complexity of ethical issues. It is thus timely to revisit ethical issues associated with conducting qualitative research within internet communities. In this article, working within a framework that goes beyond ‘procedural ethics’ to examine ‘ethics in practice’, I outline some of the ethical issues associated with conducting qualitative psychological research within online communities, using published examples to illustrate.

1.1 Guidelines for Conducting Ethical Research in Online Communities

Ethical research balances potential benefits from research against potential harm (likelihood and severity of physical, social, psychological, economic and legal harms) to research participants or others (The National Health and Medical Research Council, the Australian Research Council and the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Committee, 2007). Qualitative psychological research is increasingly conducted online, but the question of what constitutes harm and who has the ‘right’ to define harm within online communities is contentious (Hair & Clark, 2007). Disciplines, including psychology, are grappling with these issues. Over the last decade key documents by national psychology bodies on conducting research online include The American Psychological Association *Report of Board of Scientific Affairs’ Advisory Group on the conduct of research on the Internet* (Kraut, et al., 2004) and The British Psychological Society (2007) *Guidelines for ethical practice in psychological research online*. Working more broadly across disciplines the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) advocates a case-based approach, providing a set of

considerations for researchers to use in making decisions about planned research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

1.2 Procedural and Process Ethics

Prior to commencing psychological research on human subjects in online communities, university researchers are required to obtain ethical approval from an ethics review body. This formal process constitutes ‘procedural ethics’, requiring researchers to reflect on their proposed methodology and possible harm to participants and others prior to the commencement of research. Ethical guidelines, such as those by the American Psychological Association, British Psychological Society and Association of Internet Researchers identified above, provide a useful starting point for identifying and addressing potential ethical issues with an online qualitative research project. However, obtaining ethical clearance prior to commencing research is often viewed by researchers as a hurdle to be jumped, with Guillemin and Gillam (2004) noting that:

Most researchers learn quickly that they need to be savvy in addressing the potential issues of concern of the committee: using the appropriate discourse to ensure that applications will be approved as quickly as possible with minimum changes and dispute, while remaining true to their research integrity (p. 264).

While the guidelines for online research within the field of psychology, and emerging guidelines for online research generally, provide useful parameters for considering ethical issues related to online research, many review boards are still coming to terms with the issues associated with online research. Further, new types of online communities continue to emerge with new technologies. As researchers within new spaces, it is likely that in the *process* of research we will come across ethical issues that neither we, nor the ethical reviewing body, have considered prior to the research commencing. In exploring the ethical issues associated

with possible harm in virtual communities, it is important to note that ethical considerations continue beyond the procedural ethics involved in obtaining ethical approval prior to commencing research. *'Ethics in practice'*; also known as process ethics, situated ethics (Calvey, 2008) and embedded ethics (Whiteman, 2012); are broader concerns, relating to the consideration given to ethics throughout the research process as events or issues arise (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The way in which researchers respond to these unforeseen 'ethically important moments' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) may impact on potential or actual harm to online research participants and communities. A 'microethics' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) approach is advocated with reflexivity required throughout the research process to firstly identify and then respond to issues as they arise. Increasingly, online researchers are articulating their use of process ethics in making decisions in conjunction with research participants as issues arise (see, for example, Lomborg, 2013 and Sharkey et al., 2011).

2. Key ethical issues associated with conducting research in online communities

Nine ethical issues requiring consideration when conducting psychological qualitative research in online communities are outlined below. Each of these requires consideration prior to research commencing as part of procedural ethics. Researcher reflexivity and sensitivity to the needs and preferences of research participants from the time of entering the online research setting until completion of the research may result in the revisiting of some of these issues, representing ethics in practice.

2.1 Conducting research online to avoid the procedural ethics process

Some research is conducted online with the explicit purpose of avoiding the procedural ethics associated with conducting the same type of research offline. For example, Battles (2010) analysed postings regarding the human papilloma virus vaccine on a publicly

viewable Internet message board¹ among primarily American, Australian, and Canadian female adolescents and young adults, matching postings with other data on the site to determine the age of participants. Battles argued that harvesting data from adolescents online presents a way of bypassing ethics approval and parental consent processes normally associated with offline research. The use of online methods to avoid ethical review and consent procedures is a disturbing trend, particularly when dealing with vulnerable populations such as children and youth in relation to a sensitive topic. While this research was deemed exempt from an ethical approval process, Battles did consider the ethical issues associated with her study. As part of the research Battles obtained approval from the ‘gatekeeper’ of the site and provided an opt-out option to posters. However, wanting control over her own anonymity, she did not provide her own offline details to participants. In combination, this approach suggests stronger protection for the researcher than for the young research participants, who would usually be considered a vulnerable population.

2.2 Determining whether an online community constitutes public space or private space

An ongoing area of debate is how to determine whether the proposed site of online research constitutes public or private space. If we accept an online community as a public space, then many of the ethical considerations disappear. There is a long tradition of conducting naturalistic observation research in offline public spaces without the need for advising that research is being conducted, or asking for consent from those present. It can, and has, been argued that online communities and websites that are not password protected are public spaces. For example, Rodriquez (2013) was advised by a university ethics review board that illness narratives presented as internet postings by persons with early onset Alzheimer’s disease did not meet the definition for human subjects research and did not require ethical approval. Researchers are increasingly outlining their reasoning for how they

¹ See public versus private issue below

determine whether particular sites represent public or private space. Fleischmann and Miller (2013) detailed the steps used in deciding whether or not it was acceptable to use personal stories of adults with ADHD for research purposes: including stories written for the general public, but excluding those stories on websites requiring registration or by anonymous authors. Similarly, Marcus, Westra, Eastwood, Barnes, and Mobilizing Minds Research Group (2012) conducted a study of blog postings by young adults with mental health concerns, only including publicly accessible blogs that had been viewed more than 200 times.

However, some researchers contend that even sites that require registration can be viewed as public spaces. Schotanus-Dijkstra, Havinga, van Ballegooijen, Delfosse, Mokkenstorm, and Boon (2013) analysed postings to online support groups for persons bereaved by suicide. The sites required registration, and permission was sought from owning organisations, but not the participating individuals. The authors claimed that the groups were in the public domain, despite the requirement for registration, and therefore informed consent was not required. The sensitivity of the topic or setting should also be considered in determining whether an online community should be regarded as public or private. AoIR has as its first guiding principle that researcher obligation to protect increases as vulnerability increases (Markham & Buchanan, 2012, p. 4). It is difficult to imagine that research on similar bereavement support groups off-line would not require informed consent of participants.

Consistent with the AoIR first guiding principle, Holtz, Kronberger and Wagner (2012) distinguished between more vulnerable private or semiprivate groups; such as health related self-help groups; and less vulnerable groups with an outward focus aimed at informing non-members; such as political and social interest groups; in terms of researcher obligations. Even when researching the latter groups, Holz and colleagues highlighted the need to weigh public interest against members' potential privacy preferences and advocated

against publishing nicknames or exact quotes in order to reduce potentially identifiable information being found through searches.

Increasingly it is being recognised that although some online communities might be publicly accessible, members of these communities often do not view them as public spaces, intend communication for a specific audience (typically other community members), and seldom envisage researchers as part of this intended audience (Bromseth, 2002). Hudson and Bruckman (2004) empirically tested attitudes towards researchers' presence in Internet Relay Chat (IRC) chatrooms. The researcher entered each of 64 chatrooms using the name 'Chat-study'. In three of four conditions a message was sent to those present advising the chatroom was being recorded for a study on language use in online environments. These three conditions were message only, message with provision for option out, and message with provision for opting in. In the fourth condition no message was sent. The researcher was ejected from the chatroom within 5 minutes 63% of the time in first 3 conditions, clearly indicating that research without consent is not deemed acceptable by many online users.

In summary, when making an initial assessment of whether an online community should be regarded as private or public, consideration needs to be given to the accessibility of the community to the general public, the perceptions of members, community statements, topic and setting sensitivity, the permanence of records and the intended audience. It is possible that in engaging with the online community during the research process the researcher may become aware of information that changes their perception of the degree to which a particular online community represents public or private space. Working within an ethics in practice framework, the researcher may need to make changes to research procedures and reporting accordingly.

2.3 Should existing data within online communities be treated as originating from human research participants or authors?

Online data produced by individuals (e.g., material on websites, postings to online communities) forms the basis for some 'passive' online qualitative research by psychologists. There is debate over whether the harvesting and use of such data for research purposes should be conceptualised as human subject research (requiring ethical consideration) or merely as secondary textual analysis (Bradley & Carter, 2012). Related to this debate is whether the producers of this material should be viewed as research participants or as authors (Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012). If the material is viewed as produced by authors, who has ownership of the words and associated copyright: the author, the community or the owner of the site on which it is posted? (Author & colleagues, 2008).

Responses to these questions determine whether informed consent and/or complying with copyright should be the aim when quoting material. Researchers need to determine whether it is more defensible to provide attribution for material to the offline identity, the pseudonym, a pseudonym of the pseudonym or to create composite accounts. Similarly consideration needs to be given as to whether the specific online communities should be named. Even where the pseudonym and online community are not named, these may be locatable through online search engines. Researchers who do not attend to these issues risk violating ethical and copyright standards.

2.4 Does informed consent need to be obtained, and if so, from whom?

For all traditional methods of data collection and passive and active data collection within online settings determined to be private spaces, informed consent from research participants is generally required. Even in online settings acknowledged by users as being in the public domain (e.g., publicly accessible discussion boards), some individuals indicate they want permission sought before their quotes are used (Bond, Ahmed, Hind, Thomas &

Hewitt-Taylor, 2012), and some researchers routinely seek permission. For example, Marcus et al., (2012) obtained the consent of individual bloggers prior to including website addresses and quotations. When studying online communities, a further consideration is that all members of the community may be affected by the research, not just those who elect to participate. In addition to individual research participants, researchers may need to provide notifications to the community and community gatekeepers. As membership of online communities change over time, repeated notifications may be required, but this needs to be weighed against the potential disruption to the community.

When active and traditional data collection methods are used, consent procedures may largely mirror that of offline communities. In establishing a pain discussion board for adolescents, Henderson, Law, Palermo and Eccleston (2012) obtained consent from both adolescents and parents and also confirmed identities through the referring health care providers. However, a range of difficulties may be experienced in seeking to obtain consent online with passive data collection methods. Where postings are harvested from discussion boards, not all posters may be contactable as some may no longer frequent the online community. Even where posters are contactable, some may be reluctant to reveal information about their offline identity and there may be difficulties in assessing whether the individual has the ability to provide informed consent, especially when age is not verifiable.

2.5 Should anonymity and/or pseudonymity be protected?

In reporting the results of qualitative research, quotes are typically employed to support claims made. Researchers vary in their attribution of quotes. This may be guided by their views on whether the quotes are provided by authors (in which case full attribution to the individual's name or pseudonym and the setting may be made) or research participants (requiring consideration of the need to protect anonymity of the individual and the setting).

Researchers need to be sensitive to the preferences of research participants and actively discuss the preferred attribution of quotes.

Further complicating the issue is the need to consider whether or not online pseudonyms also require protection. Over time, pseudonyms develop reputations and there may also be links between the pseudonym and offline identity. In some cases, pseudonyms of pseudonyms and settings may be used. However, this alone is unlikely to be enough to protect the identification of the individual or the setting. When providing direct quotes, even without attribution, the pseudonym and community may be locatable through search engines, log files and user profiles (Beaulieu & Estalella, 2012).

Researchers have developed a number of strategies to avoid quotes being traced. Malik and Coulson (2013), in a qualitative study of permanent, involuntary childlessness, did not identify the name of the online community or the website address. Further, quotations were anonymised and paraphrased, and checked using search engines to ensure they were not traceable. Similarly, Hewitt-Taylor and Bond (2012) provided pseudonyms, didn't name websites and made minor changes to quotes so that they were not searchable. Taking this one step further, some researchers advocate the use of aggregated quotations (Bond et al., 2013) or composite accounts (Markham, 2012) that represent the meaning expressed in multiple quotations, without directly quoting. These prevent traceability and protect privacy and anonymity/ pseudonymity of individuals and online communities.

2.6 Is it acceptable to conduct covert research without identifying as a researcher to the community?

A further ethical issue is the acceptability of covert research (research conducted without identifying as a researcher to the community) and research involving deception. In comparison to offline settings, researchers have the technical capacity to adopt a range of

levels of identification in online settings. Full overt identification occurs where there is identification as a researcher, with links to any social identities within the community. As an example, in my early research in online communities I created a research identity named 'Questioner' on each of the text-based virtual communities (MOOs) where research was conducted, with social identities listed as aliases of the research identity. The description of Questioner, seen by members of the community when they first 'looked' at Questioner, read "Questioner raises her head from the keyboard to smile at you. She is probably going to ask you lots of questions about your MOOing experiences" (Author, 2001). This name and description immediately alerted others to my researcher status, with the linking of social identities also placing me as an existing member of the community.

Researcher only overt identification occurs where a researcher identifies as such, but does not provide links to social identities within the community. Paechter (2012) adopted this approach, keeping professional and personal identities separate when conducting ethnographic research on an online divorce wiki and support website. Holding dual social and research identities within a community situates the researcher simultaneously as both an insider ('regular' member of the community) and outsider (researcher observing and analysing the community). Regardless of whether or not research and social identities are linked, extreme care needs to be taken to ensure there is no slippage of information between identities (see Paechter, 2013 for a full discussion of the advantages and disadvantages associated with dual roles in online communities).

When electing to fully disclose researcher status, additional steps may be required to establish the legitimacy of research and the researcher. Barratt (2012) described how she established her legitimacy as a researcher through profiles with photographs and linking to university and project pages, noting that legitimacy also requires technical and cultural competence in the online setting.

Covert research occurs where the researcher does not identify as such. This is a strategy that may be used in passive research online. Rier (2007) conducted research on 16 HIV/AIDS Internet support groups (only some of which were open access). Rier justified the use of covert research on the basis that this approach did not intrude on participants or group discussions. While this may have provided data that was not influenced by Rier's presence, no protection was offered to research participants. Placing quotes from Rier's (2007) article into a search engine leads directly to the site, the post and responses.

Covert identification may also be used in active online research. In these situations, a researcher may create an identity (not identifying as a researcher) and instigate data collection of new material. Glaser Dixit and Green (2002) conducted research on hate crimes. In an online chatroom they posed questions and recorded answers, describing this process as interviewing. Ethics approval was obtained on the basis that there was no coercion to participate in this discussion on typical subject matter for this public forum, and that non-response bias and biases in responding and responses were likely to occur if informed consent was sought.

2.7 Is the use of deception or deceptive identities to elicit new data acceptable?

The study by Glaser and colleagues (2002) raises the question of whether the use of created identities and deception to elicit new data is acceptable research practice. Glaser et al's study is not alone. Brotsky and Giles (2007) created an identity of an anorexic young woman wanting to lose further weight, introducing herself to members of pro-anorexia online support groups as a pro-ana sympathizer wanting to communicate with others. During the period of research Brotsky developed close relationships with other members, finally exiting the sites purportedly for inpatient treatment. The use of a manufactured identity was justified on the grounds that if the purpose of the study was disclosed, access to the sites was not

likely to be granted. Brotsky and Giles viewed potential harm in terms of harm to the researcher (exposed to the material on the websites) and set up a support system for the researcher, but no support mechanisms were offered to ‘participants’. Brotsky and Giles argued that the deception was justified “given the charges laid against the pro-ana community (that they are effectively sanctioning self-starvation), and the potential benefit of our findings to the eating disorders clinical field” (p. 96). While it is arguable whether the study was justifiable on these grounds, neither debriefing nor retrospective consent procedures were conducted following the study, despite this being a requirement of most ethical codes. Indeed, Brotsky and Giles argued that participants would be unlikely to provide retrospective consent.. The potential psychological harm to participants befriended by Brotsky who may later find out about their involvement in the research does not appear to have been considered. When conducting covert research such as this, the adoption of an ethics in practice framework based on researcher reflexivity would aid in identifying and responding to issues and sensitivities that might arise throughout the research process.

2.8 How do communities and community members react to finding out that they are being researched?

There are often negative responses to overt research in online communities. Eysenbach and Till (2001) analysed newsgroup comments in response to research requests, identifying concerns relating to researcher unfamiliarity with the online contexts studied, or resentment when the research is conducted by an existing member of the group. However, not all community members may have negative reactions to being researched. Moreno, Grant, Kacvinsky, and Fleming (2012) interviewed 132 18-19 year old Facebook users about their views on being selected for research based on their Facebook profile: More than half (56.1%) thought it was acceptable, with a further 28.8% neutral, and only 15.2% expressing concerns,

particularly in relation to privacy. Heiferty (2011) described the dilemma between “disturbing the integrity of Internet communities by seeking consent or violating privacy by not seeking consent” (Heiferty, 2011, p. 949).

Where passive or covert methods of harvesting or illiciting data from community members are employed, there is the risk that community members will later discover they have been the ‘subject’ of research, and this can be detrimental to ongoing community functioning. One community member, upon finding out research had been conducted within their online support group commented:

When I joined this, I thought it would be a support group, not a fishbowl for a bunch of guinea pigs. I certainly don't feel at this point that it is a safe environment, as a support group is supposed to be, and I will not open myself up to be dissected by students or scientists (King, 1996, p. 122).

This highlights the need for ongoing ethical consideration of the sensitivity of the topic and purpose of a community in relation to the research methods adopted and reporting of findings.

2.9 Is the data obtained online of sufficient quality for research purposes?

Obtaining quality data is an essential component of ethically defensible psychological research, justifying the research burden placed on participants, resources consumed and investment by funders and society (Rosenthal, 1994). Further, failure to obtain quality data may result in inaccurate conclusions being drawn from online research. Data harvested or generated online may vary in quality from other forms of qualitative data in offline settings. Passive data collection online, such as the harvesting of discussion board postings, may provide large quantities of data for analysis. However, the data is limited by the inability to ask follow-up questions (Battles, 2010; Haigh & Jones, 2005) and the need to accept posts at

face value (Bradley & Carter, 2012). Online postings, in comparison to interviews, typically have an immediate future orientation, include the provision of informational and emotional support, provide greater detail and are less filtered by self-presentational concerns (Seale, Charteris-Black, MacFarlane, & McPherson, 2010). Further, demographic information is unlikely to be available (Battles, 2010), although a more diverse sample may be reachable online (O'Brien & Clark, 2012)

More traditional forms of active data collection, such as interviews, provide the opportunity to probe and ask follow up questions, but the researcher lacks control over the setting. Barratt (2012) reported that research participants can more easily disengage from research participation online (e.g., choosing not to respond in online interviews) and that interviews are frequently interrupted. Online text-based interviews may be time-consuming, with Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr and Elford (2004) describing the resultant data as 'light' and ambiguous. The use of audio and video recording in online interviews may minimise these potential differences.

Whether active or passive online data collection methods are used, the quality of research data may be influenced by the representation of research participants. Researchers choose which data to include and how it will be edited. Ethical representation requires sensitivity to both the individual and the online context (Markham, 2005). While differences are likely between data collected in online and offline settings, this does not mean that data collected online is unusable. Instead, possible limitations of the data collected need to be taken into consideration when analysing and interpreting.

3. Conclusion

Prior to conducting qualitative research in online communities, qualitative researchers have an ethical obligation to identify and weigh possible risks and benefits of proposed

research to both online communities and community members. Ethical frameworks developed by national psychology bodies provide the parameters for this initial procedural ethics review, with AoIR documentation (Marksham & Buchana, 2012) listing further considerations that apply to online research. Virtual environments are rapidly evolving and it is unrealistic to expect guidelines developed at one point in time to provide concrete advice that directly applies to psychological research in current and future virtual environments. Instead, these guidelines can be viewed as providing general ethical principles that can be applied to psychological research in differing online contexts. Building on ethical stances developed in offline research (ethics in practice and situated ethics, Calvey, 2008; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), continued researcher reflexivity and sensitivity to the online context is required throughout the conduct and reporting of psychological research to ‘embed’ ethical considerations (Whiteman, 2012).

In this paper, nine key ethical issues requiring consideration when conducting qualitative research online have been explored. The examples of how psychological researchers have addressed each of these issues illustrate the range of procedures adopted and researchers’ justification for these procedures. The differing decisions may in some cases reflect sensitivity to the differing research aims, methodologies and online contexts, but also suggest there is limited agreement over what might constitute the range of acceptable practices in online psychological research. This documentation of researchers’ responses is welcomed as contributing to knowledge of the range of issues psychological researchers may face in online research and debate over ways of best engaging in ethical research practice online.

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