



Practice Research Unit (PRU) – Ethical Research Guidance

The following document outlines the PRU's commitment to conducting ethical research. These are:

- Responsibility to participants
- Conducting research with service-users
- Internet-based research
- Researching from within (insider research)

Please note – this is a live document and will be reviewed annually.

Responsibility to participants

- *Protection from harm* – the PRU is committed to ensuring that research participation does not place participants at risk of physical or psychological harm. This is particularly the case when the research involves those who are vulnerable due to an imbalance of power, for example research involving service users and their families. Specific steps to minimise risk of harm to the person include ensuring participants are clear on their rights as research participants (see section on *informed consent, deception and right to withdraw* for more details); conducting research in safe environments, and where relevant, providing information on support services for participants involved in more sensitive research (see also *debriefing and aftercare*).
- *Anonymity and confidentiality*– every effort will be made to ensure participants' anonymity and confidentiality, with the limits to such assurances being explained at the commencement of any research activity. Reflecting the British Society of Criminology's Code of Ethics (2015), the PRU will also abide by this 'duty of confidentiality' by not passing on identifiable data to third parties without participants' consent (see also *Subject Access Requests*). The unit will work within the confines of current legislation over such matters as intellectual property (including copyright, trademark, patents), privacy and confidentiality, data protection and human rights (BSC, 2015). On the rare occasion that confidentiality and anonymity is waived, this would only be for legal reasons (i.e., disclosure of information relevant to the Police – see section on conducting *Research with Service-Users* for more information) or due to issues around the safety and wellbeing of the participant or those in proximity to the participant. For example, if the participant indicated they were being harmed *or* that they were harming (or planning to harm) others.



In the event of a disclosure of this kind, the participant would be informed of the researchers' duty to report it to the appropriate authority¹.

- *Informed consent, deception and right to withdraw* – participants will be made fully aware of what the research is about, why they are being consulted and how their information will be used. Consent forms and information sheets will be written in accessible language, explained thoroughly and signed off before any research takes place. Each participant will be given copies for their own records. Participants will also be informed of their right to withdraw from the research, and that they can do so at any point and for whatever reason². For potentially vulnerable participants (e.g., under 18s, older people or adults with learning disabilities), as recommended by UK Research and Innovation (2022, June 16) in their guidance '*Research with potentially vulnerable people*', time and opportunity will be given so that they can access support in their decision-making, for example by discussing their choice with a trusted adult or relative. If a participant is under 16 years of age, article 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1990) will be applied, which states that children have the right to express their views and therefore will be encouraged to do so. Following the recommendations of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018), informed consent will also be obtained from a responsible adult such as a parent or guardian.
- *Debriefing and aftercare* – the PRU is committed to a 'duty of care' for participants. After research activity has concluded (e.g., interview, focus group, workshop, survey etc.) the participant will be informed again about what they have participated in and why, and what will be done with their information. The participant will then be given the opportunity to ask questions or request further information about the research (this will be offered by email if the research has taken place online – see *Internet-based research* for more details). For face-to-face research, this will also be the time when wellbeing checks will take place, for example checking the participant is happy with the research process and has not been left with any doubt, concern or distress. For research involving sensitive topics, (e.g., abuse, substance misuse, gambling, being a victim of crime, trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder, SEND etc.), additional information detailing relevant and appropriate support services may be provided. Findings and outcomes will be shared with participants and the contact details of the PRU will also be provided should participants have any later queries or concerns.
- *Holding participant's data* – all participant information and research data will be held securely and confidentially by Interventions Alliance and/or Seetec Outsource. There will be a dedicated research folder that only authorised members of the PRU

¹ Anonymity and confidentiality will be clarified with participants as part of gaining their informed consent

² *Right to withdraw* refers here to withdrawal of participation – the right to withdraw data is discussed in the later *Data Management* section.



will have access to. Moreover, personal data and raw research data will only be accessible to PRU researchers, unless the participant raises a Subject Access Request (see below). This additional level of security has been put in place to ensure potentially sensitive data from remains confidential, even from senior management. Importantly, research participants will be informed that any data will be placed in digital archives, with their raw, anonymised data (i.e., not personal, identifiable data) being kept for a minimum of ten years. Finally, in accordance with the new laws surrounding the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR), any personal data can be erased or accessed by participants at any time.

- *Subject Access Requests (SAR)* – Under Article 15 of the GDPR, everyone has the right to access any personal data held about them by an organisation and know how that organisation is processing and using that data. This will accordingly involve any data the PRU holds relating to research participation.

Conducting research with people accessing Interventions Alliance and Seetec Outsource services

As part of their services, Interventions Alliance and Seetec Outsource work with people involved with the criminal justice system (CJS), asylum seekers and refugees and other vulnerable people. As such, there are a number of additional issues, on top of the general ethical responsibilities to participants which must be considered. These are outlined below.

- *Protection from harm* – conducting research with service-users introduces a number of complex power-dynamics. This is particularly the case for the PRU, where its placement as part of Interventions Alliance and Seetec Outsource increases the power disparity between its researchers and any individuals accessing its services. As such, not only will the general responsibilities to conducting ethical human research (as outlined previously) be applied, but additional effort will be made to assure service-users that their participation will not in any way impact on their relationship with the organisation or, for those on Probation, be in any way connected to the completion of their Order. Finally, it will be made clear there is no compulsion for any service-user to be involved. Indeed, the voluntary nature of participation will be emphasised at every stage.
- *Research involving participants who have English as an additional language* – all participants who have English as an additional language will receive an information sheet on the concept of consent prior to completing their consent forms to ensure cultural barriers surrounding consent are reduced. All consent forms and information sheets (see also *informed consent*) will be written in accessible language by trained English language professionals, these will be measured for readability by a Flesch reading ease score and a Flesch-Kincaid Grade. Suitable language proficiency to ethically participate in a study will be determined upon the context of the study, participants' language ability will be assessed both prior to gaining consent and throughout the study. Language assessment for participants will be a speaking and listening initial assessment conducted prior to completing consent



forms. Following research that discusses the complexities of translating one experience in one language to another, the PRU will not use translation to try to minimise meaning lost and to reflect the English-speaking contexts being researched (Koulouriotis, 2011).

- *Digitally recorded research* – research has shown that those involved with the criminal justice system can be more resistant to being voice recorded than other participants due to concerns related to confidentiality, trust and potential risk (Sandberg & Copes, 2012). For individuals taking part in IA research projects, the option to refuse digital recording will be firmly underlined, and the choice of other recording options will be offered i.e., interview notes (written during data collection) or field-notes (written post-data collection).³
- *Prior access to information* – given the location of the PRU within Interventions Alliance and Seetec Outsource, data on individuals accessing IA services is accessible in a way that it wouldn't be for external researchers. Here, the PRU notes its ethical responsibility to only using participant information in ways which is relevant and appropriate to the research. For example, though researchers might use data held about those accessing IA/SOTS services to see who might be good candidates to approach about taking part in a given research project, the system will not be used to 'check-up' on individuals to see if what they have suggested in the research matches later patterns of behaviour. See *Endogenous research: Conducting research from the inside* for more information on conducting insider-research.

Internet-based research

As Sugiura, Wiles & Pope (2017, p.185) note, online research has created new challenges for ethics committees, institutions and researchers, and has forced a rethink around “established ethical principles of informed consent, privacy and anonymity”. For example, there are now specific and unique challenges around online privacy; gaining informed consent for information already in the public domain; issues of identifiability; and specific legal requirements concerning data protection (UK Research and Innovation, 2022, August 21). The PRU takes the privacy and security of others extremely seriously. Our commitment to ethical internet-based research is outlined below:

- *Social media* - caution will be exercised if using social media sites (e.g. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook etc.) as sources of data. If using such sites is considered relevant to a given project, only data that is explicitly designed to be in the public domain will be used i.e., when privacy settings are set to public⁴. In addition, if social media is used to recruit participants, this will only be through the PRU

³ This option will be available to all research participants, but a greater emphasis will be placed on this for service-users in order to mitigate the additional power imbalance involved with this more vulnerable group.

⁴ It is important to note here that different social platforms have different parameters for what is considered public information, and therefore users' expectations of privacy may not be what they expect.



sharing information in the public sphere. No private accounts will be targeted for such purposes, and no personal information will be utilised.

- *Identifiability online*⁵ – when using methods such as online surveys/questionnaires, participants will not be required to give identifiable information. There may be an option for participants to add personal details (in the event of further research participation) but it will remain at the discretion of the participant. Conducting qualitative research online and/or using the internet to recruit potential participants may mean the participant becomes identifiable. However, in these instances the usual protocol of anonymity and confidentiality (as outlined earlier in this document) will apply.
- *Protection of participants* – the same processes for conducting research online will apply to research conducted offline. Ethical issues such as protection from harm, confidentiality and anonymity, informed consent (described in detail next) and withdrawal from the research etc., will all be covered before research participation takes place. Participants will also be given chance to ask questions and request further information, either through real-time (using instant messaging) or through the provision of the PRU's email contact details.
- *Privacy and Informed consent* – where primary (new) data is being gathered using online methods, informed consent will always be sought. This might be through the researcher emailing a consent form directly to the participant or, in the case of online surveys, making an opening statement clarifying that by participating that person has given their informed consent. For secondary data (i.e., data that is already in the public domain), additional steps will be taken. As recommended by Sugiura, Wiles & Pope (2017), if using data from public forums all identifying information will be removed (e.g. profile name; handle; any personal details), and no URL or hyperlinks will be added. Additional caution will also be taken in handling verbatim comments, with a preference given to summarising, altering word order or deleting words (without sacrificing meaning). As the authors state, using quotes exactly as they appear can often be traced back to the original website 'and thence to the forum member who made them' (2017, p.194). The Research Unit refers directly here to the guidance set out in the British Psychological Society's, *Ethical Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research*, which recommends that where there is ambiguity as to the public nature of the data, researchers should consider if 'undisclosed observation' may have potentially damaging effects, before making decisions on whether to use it (BPS, 2017, p.7). For example, in decisions around using data extractable from online forums, social media feeds or any other public forum.

⁵ The current direction in research is to utilise software which does not track IP addresses. This is not something we currently have at IA, however the PRU *will not* be tracking the IP addresses of anyone participating in its research.



Researching from within (insider research)

The PRU is in a unique position, in that it is funded by and situated within the organisation it is (predominantly) conducting research for. The type of research is often referred to as insider research.

Insider research (sometimes referred to as endogenous research) has great advantages. It improves access to naturalistic data i.e. people, places and systems. It has financial and practical benefits, in that it can be cheaper and easier than research conducted from the outside. And arguably of most importance, there may be a better chance of having a 'real world' impact, especially when conducting action research or when using research findings to address implications for policy and practice (Trowler, 2011). However, such positionality can also bring challenges. As Trowler (2011) notes, it can affect the researcher's ability to produce culturally neutral accounts. It might make 'seeing' more difficult because certain social/organisational practices become normalised. Challenges may occur with role conflicts as the researcher acts in other capacities in the line of work. And finally, such research runs a greater risk of interview bias - respondents may have pre-formed expectations of the researcher's alignments and preferences in ways that may influence their responses (Trowler, 2011). As such, the following ethical commitments are embedded within our research approach:

- *Maintaining independence/critical distance* – research conducted by the PRU may involve participation from IA/SOTS staff. As such, the PRU is committed to doing so in a way that does not compromise the confidentiality or anonymity of participants and is clearly communicated as independent to the general interests of the organisation. Research findings will be used *only* in the interests of furthering knowledge, and not as a means to inform management of staff practice (good or bad). Participating staff will be assured of their ethical rights, and that their participation will not place them at any risk or disadvantage (or indeed any advantage). Finally, though staff may have to check with their line-manager about research participation or might reveal their participation during supervision, this will be at the discretion of that staff member. Even amongst colleagues, the Research Unit operates from the ethical position of protecting confidentiality and anonymity.
- *Research integrity* – both the PRU, and the wider organisation, are wholly committed to conducting research that is ethical and responsible. As such, research findings will not be altered, adapted or omitted should they present the organisation and its practice in an unfavourable light. Research findings will be presented fairly and equitably as they would be if the research had been conducted by an external organisation.
- *Role conflict* – insider research can bring challenges with role conflict. However, in the case of the PRU, the researchers are solely employed in their capacity as researchers. As such, issues with role conflict will likely be negligible and easily avoidable.



- *Interview/researcher bias* – colleagues participating in PRU research will be fully informed as to the Unit's commitment to ethical research. It will be made clear that responses are confidential, that there should be freedom to participate freely and without fear of reprisal, and that there is no compulsion to respond in certain (favourable) ways.
- *Research steering* – to ensure that research conducted by the PRU is robust and ethical, a steering group is in place to review proposed research and advise on practical, ethical and other related issues⁶. The steering group is made up of internal and external professionals with research, project management and/or probation and criminal justice experience.⁷

Other ethical issues

- *Researcher safety* – whilst the safety of participants is paramount, the safety of researchers is also of concern. Where possible, research will be undertaken in IA/Seetec offices or in third party locations e.g., community centres; day centres; libraries; coffee shops etc.⁸ For research undertaken in participants' homes, a protocol of researcher 'safety checks' will be employed. Here, the researcher will alert another member of the PRU before entering and after leaving a property. In addition, the researcher will leave the name and contact details (address/phone number) of the participant with that member of the Unit, and an estimated start and end time of the interview.
- *Responsibility to colleagues* – members of the PRU, and any affiliated researchers and/or authors⁹, will be appropriately recognised for their contribution in the research process. This will be through a named acknowledgement on any publication produced as part of that work.
- *Contribution to the field* – any work produced by the PRU will be undertaken to the highest ethical standards and will be conducted with integrity and honesty. All findings will be reported exactly as they appear, with as little selectiveness as possible (i.e., research findings will not be subject to 'cherry-picking'). Any ensuing publications will uphold the excellent reputation of the disciplines of criminal justice, social care and education.

⁶ This will only be for major research projects. Shorter research projects and DIP samples will be agreed and steered by the senior management team only (SMT).

⁷ Though the steering group will advise on the practical and ethical issues around larger-scale research projects, ultimately the direction of the Research Unit will be informed by the decisions made by the SMT.

⁸ It must be noted here, third party locations can bring another set of ethical issues including confidentiality and anonymity. Conducting research, especially digital recorded research, in public spaces can attract attention. This is something to be discussed and agreed with the participant in advance of the research encounter.

⁹ Affiliated researchers/authors comprise anyone outside of the Research Unit who contributes significantly to the data collection or writing process

Practice Research Unit (PRU)

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