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Fraudulent participants in research studies: Who do you trust?

I'd finally received that golden ticket, ethical approval for my PhD research study from the university and I couldn't wait to start recruiting. My study explores one aspect of health outcomes for non-verbal children with neurodisability, how we can measure changes in communication following therapy interventions. I wanted to explore parents' views in online interviews and offered a voucher in return for their time. Seeking to recruit parents of non-verbal children (age 4 to 18) with neurodisability from across the UK, I felt that the use of social media, charities and support groups would be appropriate places to advertise. Shortly after 'launching' the study, I was thrilled to receive expressions of interest. I replied to each person with a participant information sheet and once I had received consent, fixed an interview date. I thought it strange that the first interviewee would not put his camera on, he sounded remote and there was a weird clicking noise in the background. His answers were monosyllabic and lacked depth. The second participant, also with no camera, said she was based in Bristol and said she spoke only English but sounded very much as if she was not a mother tongue English speaker and struggled to converse. I reviewed the glut of emails and realised they had arrived in the evening or early morning, all from gmail addresses and with only the briefest of messages, often with foreign sounding phrases.

Something fishy was going on so I contacted my supervisors but they had not encountered this issue previously. We discussed extra checks to 'vet' the remainder of the emails. I started to feel like a one-woman detective agency. One person had returned a checklist for a motion sickness study instead of the study consent form, another accepted the interview invitation from a West African time zone. John who said he was from London demanded his 'promised compensation'. Trying to work out who could be a genuine participant from the UK was challenging. As a therapist, I always strive to be empathetic and trusting but as a researcher I felt that if I was naive enough to be taken in by fraudsters then how could I be capable of undertaking a PhD? I was shocked that people would imitate being the parent of a disabled child and it made me wonder about their life circumstances. I've since interviewed parents who I believe are genuine and this has renewed my hope but unfortunately it's hard to put aside all suspicion.

Professor Trish Greenhalgh at the University of Oxford used Twitter to ask if any qualitative researchers had problems with fraudulent study volunteers. There was a huge response and I was relieved but saddened to learn that experienced researchers had encountered this. There is interest from the research community in collaborating to tackle this issue, I just hope that the bots won't be listening into the conversation! If you are undertaking surveys, interviews or focus groups and advertising even through what you think are trusted channels I suggest adding a section to your ethics protocol about how you are going to minimise the risk of fraudsters sabotaging the integrity of your study.

Recommended reading

Brainard, J.; Lane, K.; Watts, L.; Bunn, D. The Wasps are Clever: Keeping Out and Finding Bot Answers

in Internet Surveys Used for Health Research. *Preprints* **2022**, 2022030243 (doi: 10.20944/preprints202203.0243.v1

O'Donnell N, Satherley R, Davey E, *et al* Fraudulent participants in qualitative child health research: identifying and reducing bot activity, *Archives of Disease in Childhood* Published Online First: 20 January 2023. doi: 10.1136/archdischild-2022-325049

Rachael M. Hewitt, Catherine Purcell, Chris Bundy, Safeguarding online research integrity: concerns from recent experience, *British Journal of Dermatology*, Volume 187, Issue 6, 1 December 2022, Pages 999–1000, <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjd.21765>

Teitcher JE, Bockting WO, Bauermeister JA, Hofer CJ, Miner MH, Klitzman RL. Detecting, preventing, and responding to "fraudsters" in internet research: ethics and tradeoffs. *J Law Med Ethics*. 2015 Spring;43(1):116-33. doi: 10.1111/jlme.12200. PMID: 25846043; PMCID: PMC4669957.

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