

## Research ethics and teaching

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### ABSTRACT

Following the publication of the [BASR Ethical Guidelines](#), it is timely to reflect on the significance of undergraduate understanding and engagement with ethical standards in religious studies research. Starting from a pedagogic rationale for engagement with research ethics and approval processes, this article will reflect on the experience of developing resources to support student engagement with research ethics in the study of religion. Some of the key issues facing students and seasoned researchers alike, including those related to research online, will be used to illustrate how research ethics can provide a structure for student engagement with theoretical issues in the study of religions.

### KEYWORDS

Ethics, undergraduate research, fieldwork

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### Introduction

Recently, I spent a very interesting hour with a group of MA students working through their institutional research ethics approval form. They are going to be doing some focus groups with refugees and asylum seekers. I have encouraged them to think about reciprocal research relationships (Prideaux, 2016) and they have developed a research project which is going to be

impactful in several ways. However, by reviewing the approval form, we found that some of the issues we were discussing were opening up unexpected and profound conversations. We all had several lightbulb moments. The most significant was probably when we discussed vulnerability, an issue which is fairly well documented in the literature (as for example in Bracken-Roche et al., 2017). The group started asking whether their participants were 'vulnerable' simply by virtue of being refugees or asylum seekers? If they were labelled 'vulnerable' without their agreement or recognition of the category was this undermining their autonomy and capacity? Why is anyone considered 'vulnerable'? We had moved in a few short steps from discussing how to complete a form to discussing fundamental questions about the human condition that seasoned scholars wrestle with when discussing research ethics and methodology. Not bad for an hour!

This is an experience that I have repeated every time I have worked with students on gaining ethical approval for research projects. They often start thinking of the process as a 'tick box' task, and an imposition.<sup>1</sup> It is, they think, a task that needs completing in order to get on with the 'real' academic work. They often have an expectation that there is a 'right' answer for how to do their project, and that their job is to guess the right answer, so their application gets approved. Some assume that their status as a student gives them some sort of 'right' to interview people, that the academic endeavour and training is a taken for granted social good that anyone would recognise. Many cannot initially recognise that there is potential risk to participants, nor why anyone would be interested in whether the participants have understood where their data would be stored. When students start their studies, most do not understand the process of considering the ethical implications of their study as 'real' academic work. By the time they finish, they often talk about this process as having a profound impact on how they understand what it is to undertake research, what it means to be an academic and, perhaps most importantly, what it means to 'act ethically' in their professional relationships with others.

My own interest in research ethics started with my PhD. When I started, there was no institutional requirement for me to get ethics approval, though there were expectations about proper conduct. One of the trustees of my funding body asked me a question about my ethics protocols. As I began explaining this to him, I realised that it was very operational and mechanical – it did not sit well with the approach to fieldwork I had planned to take. This prompted me to engage with the notion of reciprocal research relations (especially in the field of geography, as for example Herman and Mattingly, 1999). My own research was all the stronger for being forced to consider this. When I started teaching, and especially given that I tend to teach modules with a fieldwork component, my interest shifted to how to engage students in the same way I had been engaged. Once I started on this path, I became more convinced both of the value of teaching about research ethics, and the ethics of research, but also of engaging students in the process of ethical approval.

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<sup>1</sup> And it would only be fair to note that, in this, they are not so different from some very experienced and established members of the academic community!

In this article I will discuss why I consider that engagement with research ethics is a valuable learning tool, beyond facilitating the specific project, and how I believe it has an important role to play not only in critical engagement with study of religion, but also in providing important transferable skills and competencies which have benefit to students beyond their studies. As will be clear from the vignette above, my position is that ethical engagement is about more than managing risk. It is about ensuring quality, deep learning, and modelling how to work with others. I very much share the view that 'as teachers we have a responsibility to give students the skills to navigate their own ethical maps' (Valentine, 2005, 486) and that research ethics, and the institutional approval process, provides one set of cartographic tools. Although the classroom discussion of research ethics might be a useful entry into normative ethics, and a discussion of teleological and deontological approaches to ethics, virtue ethics or relational ethics it is not this philosophical discussion which I primarily concern myself with here. Though it is reference to these frameworks that might well shape the discussion, it is the issues that relate to the study of religion, to understanding and analysing religion, and to the practical out workings of a philosophical position that are where I consider the most immediately significant and valuable learning to be located.

Although much of this discussion will have significant overlaps with the experience of seasoned academic researchers, research performed with and by undergraduates poses a specific set of ethical challenges which will be discussed below. These challenges are often overlooked by the research community, and sometimes in teaching, because it is assumed that undergraduate student researchers and their outputs do not have a significant impact and do not pose important ethical issues (Richman and Alexander, 2006, 164). The BASR Ethical Guidelines clearly include student research:

The Ethical Guidelines is aimed at scholars who are engaged in research in the study of religions at undergraduate, postgraduate, and postdoctoral level in educational institutions in the United Kingdom. (2019,1)

In specifying student research, the Guidelines and the BASR both take seriously the ethical implications of student research but also provide a framework within which students and their supervisors can engage with ethical issues. This active engagement takes the focus of research ethics away from the approval process which may otherwise dominate conversations<sup>2</sup>, and instead provides the opportunity for the discussion of key methodological issues, for deep learning, and for developing transferable understanding and skills.

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<sup>2</sup> Sometimes for good reasons, as the time lag in gaining approval can be especially significant for time limited student projects.

## Student Research Contexts

Most University curricula engage with research-based learning to some extent, with the work of Healey being particularly widely used. Healey and Jenkins (2009) state that their purpose is to 'move more curricula in the direction of developing students as participants in research and inquiry, so that they are producers, not just consumers of knowledge' (2009, 6). The 'Healey Matrix' (Healey, 2005) - as it is often known - describes a shift from research led to research based learning, where research led (consumer) involves 'learning about current research in the discipline' whilst research based (producer) involves the student 'undertaking research and inquiry' (Healey, 2005, 70). The QAA Benchmark (2019) statements specify that students should be able to 'identify, gather and analyse primary data and source material, whether through textual studies or fieldwork' (2019, 18) and note at various point the ways in which fieldwork and independent research may be fostered. Research takes many forms, and for many undergraduate students, as the Benchmark statement notes, it will be primarily textual – researching a particular theme or issue through the literature. This work is itself not without ethical significance. The choice of analytical tools, the topics researched, the scholars engaged with are, as the decolonial education movement (e.g. the NUS 'Why is my curriculum white?' campaign) has shown us, highly ethically charged. It is not the ethics of textual projects with which I concern myself here, though I note that the BASR Ethical Guidelines draws our attention to the issues:

Some research on religions is entirely literature-based. However, this does not mean that such studies are necessarily devoid of ethical considerations. (2019, 2)

However, I am specifically concerned here with the significant proportion of undergraduate students who undertake research that involves directly working with human subjects. I do not limit this, though, to the standard 'interview, survey, observation, focus group' range of activity - work with archival primary material where individuals are still living is also part of this picture. The BASR Ethical Guidelines specifically notes the use of photographic material in this regard: 'When using historical photographs every effort should be taken to identify individuals shown and that photographs taken against the will of those depicted are thoroughly contextualised and, whenever possible, living relatives are contacted for permission' (2019, 4). A similar claim can be made for any type of archival material. Students, and indeed any researchers, looking at letters or children's essays which are publicly available via archives in libraries or elsewhere may assume that the material, being readily accessible by anyone, is without ethical import in its use. Controversies such as that surrounding the work of academic Anna Hájková demonstrate the extent to which this cannot be assumed. Hájková published claims that a concentration camp survivor had a lesbian affair with a camp guard and was subsequently fined in the German courts following legal action by the survivor's daughter. Whatever we think about this particular case, it is nevertheless true that family members did not believe the academic was justified in publishing their findings. Obviously, this case raises all sorts of

interesting and challenging issues, which cannot be pursued here, about academic freedom and integrity. What it most clearly illustrates is that we cannot assume archived material about deceased individuals will not raise immediate ethical concerns in its use. Engaging students with these debates has the potential to develop a fuller methodology which enriches analysis through taking seriously the ethical significance of the research being undertaken.

Although this archival research is important and likely to be key for many students, it is fieldwork which most frequently raises ethical issues and which ethics approval processes tend to foreground as 'risk' activities. Fieldwork is unsurprisingly popular among many students studying religion. 'Religion isn't lived in textbooks' (Gregg and Scholefield, 2015, 1), and it is in the field, where the contemporary significance and the vital, evolving activity of religion can be studied and understood most effectively. There are numerous guides to fieldwork ethics, some of which are discussed below, which highlight the key issues, such as informed consent and data protection, which ethics approval processes focus on. However, rather less frequently do these guides align on the types of ethical challenge which the BASR Ethical Guidelines might encourage us to reflect upon with students. The Guidelines makes a key distinction between ethical issues and risk management processes:

Ethics is itself part of the subject matter of the study of religions, and hence researchers can be expected to have familiarity with ethical decision-making, and how different religious communities have different ethical values. Ethical decisions can at times be contentious, and are often matters of personal judgement. It is important that ethics should not be merely conflated with methodology, health and safety, risk assessment, or the feasibility of research, although these are areas of institutional concern, and at times bear some relationship to ethical considerations. (2019, 2)

In fieldwork training with students, we can use the ethics approval process to open up the ethical issues which go beyond the 'institutional concerns' and generate significant learning opportunities, as with the example I opened with. As I will discuss below, the approval process as a teaching resource can provide valuable as well as transferable learning.

As well as archival research and fieldwork, service learning is a third context for student activity which I consider to be ethically significant. Ethical issues are relevant and significant in-service learning especially and most obviously when it is a research placement (Prideaux and Starkey, 2020). However, other forms of service learning (such as volunteering) have ethical significance. Institutional processes are likely to focus on risk in terms of health and safety rather than on the risk to others which ethical processes encourage us to consider. An approach to service learning which reduces the consideration of risk to health and safety undermines the opportunity for reflection and deep learning about power and responsibility (Chapdelaine et al., 2005).

A final dimension to student research, which opens up ethical issues and questions, is the publication of student research to broader audiences. As the BASR Ethical Guidelines note: 'It is in the interests both of the scholar and the wider community to disseminate one's findings' (2019, 5). I certainly consider that this should apply to undergraduate research as much as any other research. I have sometimes heard it claimed that as students' research is not going to be published, it should not be subject to the same ethical scrutiny that 'true' academic research is held to. As well as undermining any sense of undergraduate research being part of the student's engagement with, and entry to, their academic community of practice, this approach fails to take seriously the deeper ethical issues with which we should be concerned. Most obviously, why should people give of their time to assist research which will have no benefit beyond the student gaining a mark towards their classification? Indeed, it has been argued on this basis that student research should only be permitted if there is a reasonable chance of it being published (Gallagher et al., 2013).

Increasingly, students are sharing their research. I have certainly noticed a marked increase in the number of participants who ask the student if they can receive a copy of the completed essay or dissertation. The Community Religions Project publishes the best examples of student work every year as a resource for the community and an acknowledgement of the quality and value of the work produced. The number of students taking part in annual events such as the British Conference of Undergraduate Research grows on an annual basis, with 2021 seeing 500 student delegates from 70 different institutions. Students also share their work through blogs, social media and student publications. The BASR Ethical Guidelines remind us that 'Researchers should also consider the likely consequences of their research for the wider society as well as the immediate research participants' (2019, 2). Sharing student research is a route through which it can have a wider impact, but it also raises a range of ethical questions and considerations. These include apparently straightforward, but nonetheless challenging questions, such as whether the participants have fully consented for publication in contexts that they may not be familiar with, and how the organisation assures itself that the research is of good enough quality to be shared. In my experience, student research can be taken very seriously by community members and others who are implicated in research – and so publication can have consequences the students, and indeed the supervisor, may not predict.

### **Why engage with research ethics and approval processes?**

[...] ethical thinking requires both skills and practice, which in an increasingly complex world needs to be developed and reflected upon. Ethical thinking is becoming a practice required by everyone as they negotiate the social world, from the teenager on Facebook to the Mumsnet moderator (<http://www.mumsnet.com/>) to the academic engaged in qualitative research and knowledge production. (Miller et al., 2012, 182)

Having identified the contexts where students will be facing some of the issues raised by research ethics and approval processes I now turn to discuss why and how I think engagement with research ethics, and with institutional ethical approval processes, can be as valuable to subject and transferable learning and skills development as it is to the production of quality research and outputs.

Before doing this, though, I need to acknowledge the limitations of institutional governance structures around research ethics. As Miller et al point out, 'protocols to standardize "good", ethical research practices can only go so far' (2012, 177). There is a limit to the extent that governance frameworks can settle or even identify the complexity of research in the field:

The growth of ethical governance has done little to lessen the complexity of the ethical dilemmas encountered in practice by qualitative researchers. (ibid, 176)

Institutional concerns tend to be first and foremost about risk, and especially risk of reputational damage. Universities with links to hospitals and strong traditions in science and medicine can find that the shared institutional governance structure for ethical approval is overly defined by the biomedical model, which does not always translate well into qualitative research in the humanities and social sciences. The focus of ethical approval processes on issues, such as consent and data security, can distract attention from the wider societal impacts of research and the related ethical implications. The classic examples here are to ask whether it is possible for an institutional ethical governance process to approve field research which is being undertaken in partnership with oil companies to support drilling for oil, or marketing for unhealthy food products. The process rarely would prevent this research because the focus is on the risk to the individual participant, rather than the broader ethical implications of the research. My intention here is not to justify ethical approval processes themselves, but to explain how I have used them as a springboard for wider learning, and as an opportunity to develop transferable as well as subject specific knowledge and skills.

The first benefit of quality student engagement with research ethics and approval processes is that, in my experience, it leads to quality research. As a member of our Faculty Research Ethics Committee for several years, I was often involved in discussions about whether the issues that raised concerns about a specific project were of a methodological or ethical nature. This demonstrates how difficult it is to disentangle method, methodology and research ethics. At its most basic, the question being asked was whether it was ethical to conduct research which was not methodologically sound and therefore unlikely to result in robust conclusions. In my experience then, the approval process can force a stronger discussion about method and methodology which starts with the participants, purpose, and impact of a specific project. Good engagement with the ethics approval process should then lead to a more robust reflection on the method and methodology of the project, which in turn should lead to a higher quality project and more impactful outcomes.

Using an ethics approval process in the classroom or supervision provides a framework within which to ask challenging questions about the project and its impact. Initially, this is usually about introducing students to core and basic concepts, such as those concerned with data protection or consent. However, as my opening vignette demonstrated, these are opportunities to open up much deeper questions about the research process which engage students to develop, nuance and inflect their project to reflect the challenging ethical issues they can be faced with. As my methods teaching tends to focus on reciprocal research relations and research co-creation, it is unsurprising that students are especially challenged by the discussion about the 'value' of their research. Is it reasonable to ask a busy professional to give up an hour of their working day, so that the student can interview them, when the only benefit may be the assessment grade the student receives? In fact, professionals often *are* happy to give up their time in this way – especially if they have some commitment to the potential for the project to engage the student themselves with the profession. Two good examples this year were a student researching school chaplaincy and a student researching infertility organisations. In the first example the student received relatively good numbers of responses from chaplains who were keen for a student, who happened to be about to train as a teacher, to know more about their job. The infertility organisations, on the other hand, found it impossible to find time to be interviewed – potentially because there was less clarity for them about any potential impact, including for the student. The discussion of 'value' invariably leads to stronger research, even when the student is unable to get respondents. A methodological discussion which focusses on the barriers to participation opens up a range of significant issues – not just about research itself, but also specific to the participants. Students see the contribution of the participants (or the lack of it) in a different light and can extend their analysis through closer attention to the power dynamics involved in the research relationship.

The second reason I have observed to engage actively with research ethics and approval processes is the opportunity for deeper subject learning and skills development that this creates. The reason we include and encourage fieldwork or other research activity is that it is a means of developing a deeper understanding of religion in context and in practice, as well as learning key research skills. The research ethics discussion extends this by asking deeper questions which are challenging not only in terms of ethical thinking and discussion, but also in terms of learning specifically about religion. A student who starts off thinking research ethics might just be about wearing the right clothes when on a fieldwork trip can be supported through the ethics approval process to think about what sorts of research questions are appropriate, whether there is any duty to take part in research as a participant, and the nature of emic and etic religious discourses.

It is particularly, I would argue, in the context of carrying out fieldwork that fairly foundational issues, such as the Insider/Outsider debate, really take shape and come to life for the student. My experience of teaching the debate in two different contexts – one where the students then conducted fieldwork

and one where they did not – has been that the deeper learning and more nuanced analysis occurred in the first instance. This deeper learning can often be a genuine change in the students' understanding of religion. The shift from thinking that 'any Christian can tell you about Christianity' to understanding that 'any Christian can only tell you about their Christianity' is rather more profound than such a trite statement would indicate. Couching this discussion in terms of ethical thinking, rather than the practical experience of the fieldwork, is an important dimension of this deeper learning. Rather than the question being 'How can I get good data?' the question becomes 'What is good data?' This then opens up a variety of discussions which might start with the Insider/Outsider debate but rapidly open up the practical and lived implications of questions for instance about the nature of religious knowledge, practice, transmission or leadership.

Lastly, and as the quote with which I started this section alerts us, ethical thinking is a skill that extends beyond the learning environment and the qualification. Advance HE and QAA 'Education for Sustainable Development Guidance' (2021) for instance notes several times the importance of ethical behaviours and engagement with ethical questions and ethical frameworks. The student, who has been involved in a critical engagement with an ethical approval process, who has undertaken a rigorous piece of fieldwork, which they have analysed, conscious of the ethical implications of the work they have undertaken, has developed skills which are relevant well beyond the academic context. Specifically, they have taken the ethical theory and learning they have been introduced to and used a governance process to translate it into a very specific context where they must own the process and the outcome. This is valuable for any project work in any context – extending project management beyond a relatively banal process and instead asking analytical and extending questions which can transform the quality and significance of the outcomes.

It should not be overlooked as well, though it is rather banal, that in terms of transferable skills much of professional life is taken up with completing forms for governance processes! In any walk of life students are likely to come across governance processes such as risk assessments. Increasingly, most professional roles require more than a glancing awareness of data protection. Having experience of working through an approval process, and developing a data management plan, is in itself a useful and specific transferable skill and one which I have seen students use on CVs and in job applications.

### **Developing resources to support student engagement with research ethics**

How, then, can student learning and engagement around research ethics be supported? In my role as Director of the Community Religions project at the University of Leeds, I developed a set of online resources in order to support student engagement with the BASR Ethical Guidelines. The development of these resources was supported by Natasha Jones, an undergraduate research assistant (see [BASR Bulletin No. 138 in 2021](#) for her reflections on the process), and sought to draw together materials as part of the broader remit of

the Community Religions Project, which is to support, share and celebrate student research in locality. The release of these resources is currently on hold because of Covid pressures, although the basic structure is visible on the CRP website: <https://crp.leeds.ac.uk/student-research-ethics>. However, the learning which emerged from this small project both endorsed and occasionally challenged my views about how student engagement with research ethics can have a significant impact on student learning.

Firstly, it was clear, both in working with students and reviewing existing material, that there is a difficult balance to be struck, foregrounded in the discussion already, between an instrumentalist and a more nuanced approach to learning about research ethics. For many students engaging with research ethics, their immediate concern, largely shaped by the institutional governance mechanism of the ethics approval process, is how to achieve the particular end of getting permission. They fundamentally wanted to know what they needed to write on the form in order to get permission to do what they had planned. This is in contrast to the more nuanced approach and engagement with ethical thinking that educators would want to support their students to engage with. To some extent this is reflected in the textbooks available which discuss research ethics (e.g. Paul, 2010; Wisker, 2018). A quality resource will, of course, support the instrumental objective of gaining approval, but will start from the more significant objective of understanding and engaging with the ethical significance and implications of research. What has become clear in developing the resources is that there is a limit to the extent to which a relatively static online resource, which does not allow for discussion, can serve both objectives. Although the resources can point towards the deeper issues and questions, and highlight key debates in study of religions which are relevant, it will nevertheless be structured around the usual categories (such as consent and data protection) that governance processes are orientated towards.

Secondly, Natasha and I tussled for quite some time over what the value of producing resources would be, when each institution has different governance processes, local specialised training, and there are a range of recognised source texts on research ethics. We were both keen to focus on the BASR Ethical Guidelines specifically and to see this as a way of supporting students and educators to engage with and use the Guidelines as a learning material. This then became part of thinking about how we induct students as 'novice researchers' into a national community of practice of those researching religion (Prideaux and Starkey, 2020). It became clear that what was needed from the resources was to actively take research ethics out of the realms of the textbook and into a lived context with examples from fieldwork and projects specific to the study of religion. The Community Religions Project, with its archive of student research, is a particularly useful context within which to attempt to do this.

When researching the available materials for teaching research ethics, it was evident that there is a relative paucity of textbooks which actively engage with undergraduate students as researchers conducting ethically significant work. Even a textbook with the title *The Student's Guide to Research Ethics* (Paul,

2010) turns out to be primarily aimed at postgraduate research students. The *Undergraduate Research Handbook* in the Macmillan Study Skills series (Wisker, 2018) is a good example of a textbook supporting student research which has a chapter on research ethics. It provides an excellent overview of key processes and issues to be aware of, largely shaped around the standard ethical approval themes. However, despite being orientated towards research projects in the arts and humanities, the chapter neither supports students in developing deeper ethical thinking, nor highlights issues which go beyond the procedural. Notably, the text also introduces suggestions which might be problematic, e.g. the use of Survey Monkey for surveys (2018, 100), when many institutions advise against this because of data ownership issues. This was useful to note – even fairly standard texts might not meet the needs for our contexts.

Textbook resources exist, and are valuable, but they are process orientated: the student identifies a topic they want to research, and the textbook guides them in how to do it in a way which will satisfy the concerns of an ethics committee. As has been made clear, however, there are a number of fundamental ethical issues - such as whether it is right to do the research at all, the power relations between student and participant – which are missing from the standard textbook coverage. Put bluntly, the textbooks help students to *do* the research but do not help the students to consider whether it is *right* to do it, beyond the standard governance categories of avoidance of harm. The intention then for our resources is to try to bridge this gap and open up the area of research ethics to less procedural activity and more ethical thinking.<sup>3</sup>

### **Some ethical issues and challenges for student research**

Having identified the significance of engaging with research ethics as more than a process and reflecting on some of the key issues with developing appropriate teaching resources in this area, I will now turn my attention to what some of the key issues in research ethics are for undergraduate students. I take it for granted, as the BASR Ethical Guideline state: 'Researchers should be committed to maintaining the basic principles of honesty, rigour, transparency, and respect' (2019, 2). Clearly, for students as well as academics, this involves a whole range of issues which extend beyond research ethics narrowly construed, but also includes academic integrity (often reduced to plagiarism, but clearly extending well beyond that). For this discussion, I am focussing on the issues which are specific to undergraduate research and particularly research with people.

One of the key issues that pertains to all undergraduate research is that of competency. As the BASR Ethical Guidelines identify: 'Researchers should be aware of the scope and limits of their professional competence, and should

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<sup>3</sup> Disappointingly, we are not yet able to release our resource because, like so much, it has had to be put on hold while we adjust to the impact of Covid. The process so far has been rich and engaging and, as this brief reflection demonstrates, has raised a variety of issues for us about what a quality resource in this area looks like.

not undertake work for which they are unqualified, or claim expertise outside their range of competence' (2019, 2-3). For this reason, student research with vulnerable groups will often be prevented by institutional policy. It is not always clear how we establish who is qualified and who has competence. If, for instance, we see the undergraduate degree as the basic 'qualification' in our discipline then arguably all undergraduate research would be outside the scope and limits of student competence. In most undergraduate research projects, we would understand qualification and competence based on training to date in the programme. As has been argued elsewhere (Prideaux and Starkey, 2020), taking part in research is a key aspect of the student navigating their move from novice towards expert status within the disciplinary community of practice. The ethical approval process becomes, at this point, a means by which the student demonstrates their competency and qualification for research. Interestingly, completing an ethical approval process therefore becomes an assessment point, rather than a tick box process. Successfully applying for ethical approval is a demonstration of competency in articulating the ethical issues that pertain to a specific project and competency to conduct the project. Arguably, as well, it is the point at which an undergraduate student can demonstrate competency which they may bring from outside their course. The most obvious examples of this that I have come across are when students have previous professional experience in schools or care homes. Although our process tends to assume undergraduate students are not competent to work with vulnerable groups this is to make an unwarranted assumption about the experience of students prior to study.

Again, pertaining to student research in all disciplines, not just religious studies, is the range of ethical issues prompted by online research. As the educator, this can pose new and interesting challenges as I experienced myself recently with a student project I was supervising. The student had come across some useful material on Instagram and we proceeded to have a discussion about whether it would be ethical to use it. However, it rapidly became clear that my limited engagement with social media meant I was ill equipped to provide effective advice. The supervision was then turned on its head as the student spent the rest of the session training me in Instagram and explaining to me what the ethical challenges with using the data would be. I certainly left the supervision much better informed, and we both arrived at a sensible and ethical approach to using the material. This experience really emphasised for me how rapidly changing the online environment is. The BASR Ethical Guidelines provided a useful framework for our discussion, including the reflection that the issues themselves are not peculiar to the online environment:

Research in digital environments, such as (but not limited to) the online environment and video games, can lead to ethical questions regarding representation, anonymity, the identity of participants, and many others. Several of these ethical considerations are not limited to the online environment. (2019, 6)

Although these considerations are not limited to the online environment, they are nevertheless differently constructed and can be somewhat hidden, as my

example demonstrates. The online context, although a specific challenge, is also therefore a significant opportunity. Student 'competence' in the environment (though noting that I am not here claiming we should assume younger students are 'digital natives') allows them to both engage in new opportunities for data collection but also to proactively reflect on the ethical issues which arise from these environments. There is not necessarily a preformulated guidance or a handy chapter in a textbook which deals with the particular example they want to use and so, excitingly, they can start to map and explore the ethical terrain for themselves.

More specific to research with religious communities, there are two issues which the BASR Ethical Guidelines identifies which can be particularly significant or challenging in undergraduate research. The first is around power relations and the second is around equality. Power dynamics are often a challenge in any research project. As the BASR Guidelines state:

When coming into contact with religious communities, there is often a disparity in power relationships. The researcher has the power to place his or her findings in the public domain, while religious communities typically have gatekeepers with the power to allow or prevent access. These relationships need to be negotiated, and appropriate agreements secured. (2019, 3)

For the undergraduate researcher, particularly a younger student, these challenges can be practical or relate to the student's health and safety. Student training around fieldwork must always include how to deal with overt attempts to convert or excessive offers of hospitality for instance. A very minor example many years ago was a small research group who missed a scheduled meeting with one research participant because another insisted they stay for food. Although at the time this was seen as merely inconvenient, the more serious issues and risks which it indicated occupied the group supervision for quite some time. The power dynamics of the relationship between researcher and researched is therefore somewhat different when it is a novice researcher involved. Their ability to place material in the public domain is somewhat limited, their assessed work may rely on material from the fieldwork and they may be working to restricted timelines. In addition to the practical implications of this, there are also deeper issues which can lead to valuable ethical thinking about the exercise of power and about how and why religious individuals and groups may experience powerlessness. As well as relating to questions of competency, the issue of power dynamics provides a valuable context for exploring deeper issues about the experience of religious groups, and the students' own sense of their role.

The last issue which warrants some specific discussion here is that of equality. The BASR Ethical Guidelines note that:

[...] it should be acknowledged that numerous religious communities are not committed to the same principles of equality as an academic institution or the investigating scholar might wish. Researchers may at times be prevented from gaining access to premises or parts of them,

or to events, for example on the grounds of gender, religion, or ethnicity. Some research topics can only be explored effectively by scholars of a particular gender or ethnicity, and this must be recognised, notwithstanding normal considerations of equal opportunities. However, wherever it is practical, care should be taken not to exclude a researcher from a project on the grounds of gender, race, religion, or ethnicity, and every effort should be made to ensure fair representation in collaborative enterprises. (2019, 3)

This is the same for all researchers, but can be especially practically and personally challenging for undergraduate students as it demands some deep ethical thinking about significant contemporary issues and competing claims around equalities. Again, experience and age can be a compounding factor for the challenges the undergraduate student might experience. As seasoned researchers, many of us have experienced inclusion and exclusion in problematic ways during fieldwork. For younger students, this can be among their first visible experienced of overt exclusion, and as such can be especially personally challenging. Even something relatively benign, such as women being required to cover the head in a place of worship, can be challenging for the student. Interestingly, there are also cases of presumed inclusion. One example that sticks in my mind was the student who came to see me in office hours because at the end of an interview, the student had disclosed to the interviewee that they were not a Christian. The interviewee then asked if they could go back and change their answers to some of the questions! It is not always the case that experience of inclusion and exclusion during research are so visible, but it is often challenging for the student when it is. Although this example highlights a health and safety issue as an ethical issue in terms of governance, it also raises deeper ethical, methodological and religious questions about the role of the researcher, the place of religion in contemporary society, the politics of equalities and competing truth claims. However, eventually it must be recognised that some students simply cannot do some types of research because of who they are. Although this can be incredibly personally challenging, it is also a fruitful context for rich discussion about what it means to study religion in the field in the contemporary UK.

This fairly rapid look at some of the ethical issues which particularly face undergraduate research has been specifically linked to the BASR Ethical Guidelines and hopefully illustrates how the Guidelines document can be a teaching resource in itself. As a basis for unpacking a vast range of issues, reflecting on their practical ramifications, and engaging in some deeper ethical thinking about the nature of research about religion and with religious people, I think it has the potential to be a very valuable resource.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I have made the case for the active use of the BASR Ethical Guidelines in undergraduate student education. Engaging students in undergraduate research, especially in fieldwork which is locally embedded, potentially impactful and publishable, is a prime opportunity for students to evidence subject expertise and transferable skills. By supporting a deeper

engagement with research ethics, both in terms of the process of gaining ethical approval but also, and more fundamentally, in the deeper ethical thinking about research, we can be doing more for students and for research participants. Students develop enhanced and honed skills and understanding of key theoretical and methodological concerns in the study of religion whilst research participants are more likely to see value in their participation and to have a positive and quality professional engagement with a representative of our higher education institutions.

Too often, in the resources and processes, research ethics is reduced to the procedural, to a discussion of how to 'do the right thing' to gain approval for the project which is planned. Engaging students with the ethical dimension of their research, and indeed all of their learning, beyond the process and the final grade can create a space for students to engage critically with their educational experience. My experience is that students are crying out for this engagement - as the student-led decolonising projects which we have seen across the sector have evidenced. A graduate who, five years after graduating, sits in a work meeting and challenges the assumptions underpinning how the organisation works with vulnerable members of society, will be putting into practice learning we have supported as part of a conversation about research in the study of religion. If our objective is to enable the next generation to become critical, ethical leaders who will have a sustained impact in whatever they choose to do, then I suggest that an active engagement with research ethics at multiple levels is a valuable dimension to our religious studies curriculum.

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