Online Research Methods: An interview with Dr Neil Coulson.

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Dr Neil Coulson, Associate Professor in Health Psychology at the University of Nottingham, is at the forefront of online research methods. His primary research explore the role of online support communities, online surveys, and the role of social networking sites for people with a range of health conditions. As part of the Working Party on Internet Mediated Research (a committee of the BPS Research Board), Dr Coulson has recently helped to revise the Ethics Guidelines for Conducting Internet Mediated Research.

It is estimated that 36 million adults in the UK access the internet every day and that 43% seek health related information which represents; a rise from 18% in 2007 (ONS, 2013). It is unsurprising then, that the use of the internet in health psychology research has become increasingly popular over the last decade (Coulson & Knibb, 2007; Lieberman & Goldstein, 2006). As a PhD student whose research uses a variety of online methods to explore the impact of Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) on quality of life, I have found that there remains a distinct lack of literature on 'how to' do online research, an issue which this interview attempts to resolve, at least in part.

What advantages are there to using online research methods in comparison to offline methods? What I've found is that you are able to access much richer accounts of illness experiences and sometimes there have been aspects of that experience have been revealed that haven't been identified in traditional face-to-face methodologies. Sometimes patients may feel that they can say a lot more about an issue online than they might reveal face-to-face with a researcher. When you think about the messages [e.g those found in online support forums] specifically, people are crafting these messages, taking time to think about what goes into them, you can see that there is much more depth than you might get in a face to face interview. Similarly, for online surveys, they really go to great lengths to explain issues or say things because they don't fear they're going to be judged. Or they fear if they say it face to face they'd be looked down upon or feel inhibited.

Are there any practical advantages to using online research methods? Yes, a few actually. The sending of the survey to participants, whether it's through email or making available through an online forum, it gets to them a lot quicker than traditional paper and pencil. With paper and pencil, when sitting and entering the data, errors can creep in but on the online survey you're downloading it from the software onto an excel spread sheet or straight into SPSS. So there is more data accuracy, which also saves time. So there are a lot of practical benefits that I've seen in terms of cost, time and man power but it's not cost free. You may still have subscriptions to software companies but arguably it's a lot cheaper and a lot less resource intensive than traditional paper and pencil methods; print it all up, post it all out, wait for it to get to people, post it back, and data entry. Also, on the questionnaires themselves, sometimes you want a respondent to answer 'if yes, go to this question, if no to this one' and on a paper and pencil survey you have to rely on them understanding the instructions but online you can use 'if-then' logic. So if you answer 'yes' it will automatically take you to the next applicable question and that helps completion. On the whole I've found it to be successful and I've had studies where I have had around 700 HIV patients complete a detailed questionnaire in three days and I'm not sure I would get that in a traditional methodology.

What kind of feedback have you had from participants about participating in online methods? Some people enjoy talking about an issue online but there is a down-side to this; you can say more, be more passionate, be more honest online but you can also be slightly ruder and I've had instances where people have emailed me [about an online survey being conducted] saying, 'I can't believe you are reducing my illness to a bunch of tick boxes, how dare you' and there's been quite a lot of abuse. People can send off emails quite easily because they feel that they're not facing you and therefore it's safer to do that. So, that is a downside, but I've equally had other people who've said, 'I really value this opportunity and I like the fact that you're actually interested and I feel I can explain it more because I can sit and really think about my answers'; it's a mixed bag.

What advice would you give to somebody new to online research methods, for example a student? The advice would depend on which particular methodology that they wanted to use; whether it be message boards, online interviews or online surveys. What I would say is that simply because it's an online methodology doesn't mean to say you have to come at it cold.

We can learn a lot from the lessons of traditional methodologies. So many of the good advice you would get about designing a paper and pencil questionnaire, for example, are just as applicable in the online context and we mustn't lose sight of that. The second thing I always say is just because it's done online, doesn't mean it will be easier. We hope it will be more convenient and get good sample sizes but it's easy for people to ignore emails etc. So don't be naive and think it will all be plain sailing. I also emphasise the fact that you shouldn't lose sight of the people who are participating just because you can't see them. You shouldn't forget these people are real, living with illness, often in a lot of distress and life is pretty difficult for them at that point in time. You shouldn't ever forget that. It's people at the heart of it and that's easy to forget.

What are the main ethical issues that you encounter when using online research methods? I think one of the things that we forget in ethics is that doing online research doesn't demand a whole new set of ethical guidelines but rather we should consider the ethical principles that guide research with human participants and reflect on how they apply to an online context. So it isn't a case that we should forget everything we've done with face to face research and try to develop new ethical principles [*Ethics Guidelines for Conducting Internet Mediated Research*, 2013]; actually it's about taking existing ethical principles and simply mapping them on and considering them in the context of online research. The revised BPS ethical guidelines compliment and supplement the ethics code for human research and it reminds us of the key ethical principles that should under-pin all research, regardless of modality, and that's what it's all about. In the new guidelines those four ethical principles are developed and considered in light of different online methodologies and the potential issues researchers may face when trying to adhere to and uphold those principles. So, the new set of guidelines is trying to look back at the existing principles but apply them and look forward and say, regardless of online methodology, these principles are what we need to consider.

What are your thoughts on the level of education (on online research methods) currently experienced by undergraduate students across universities? I think it's sporadic from university to university, it may vary, I could be wrong but I don't think online research methods are a mandatory part of the undergraduate curriculum. I get the sense that it's based more on whether staff with expertise happen to offer some projects. I would like to see online methodologies being a core part of the research methods training of both the undergraduate and postgraduate curriculum, and not just left to the discretion of individual institutions.

If online research methods were to become a part of the curriculum what do you think would need to be covered? Ethics would obviously need to be covered but I think students need to know what types of online tools we have at our disposal. When should we use them? Why should we use them? How should we use them? That's what I think should be included in the curriculum. Beyond that there's a limit as to how much you can include. So I think a starting point is online surveys and online focus groups. However, increasingly we need to recognise the importance of social media, the use of Twitter and social networking sites and all the issues associated with analysis of online content of, for example, blogs and websites. One thing that I don't think we are particularly skilled at teaching are the legal issues in online research. If we're using other people's words from a website, who owns that and are there some issues there? I think that's an issue that we all need to pay a little bit more attention to and develop a route forward.

Where do you think health psychologists should be heading with online research methods? I think we have a lot of emerging technologies, development of existing ones and new opportunities for research; particularly, mobile technology, [mobile] applications, and real-time data collection. All these issues are going to be important but I think there's going to be a blur between what people think is private and what people think public because people will be generating data from almost any point of their daily life: home, workplace, in the bath, all sorts of things. Things are changing in terms of what kind of data could be generated, how it could be generated, where it could be generated and how it could be transmitted back to the researcher. I think these sorts of issues are going to be very important. I think it's just thinking through the consequences of the developing technologies and how psychologists want to harness them. I'd certainly like to see more psychologists use online methods. You do see a lot of traditional methods that could be used online, if only to triangulate with offline methodologies but as I said earlier, you can reveal new things through online research and that's something we should be aware of.

You have a textbook due to be released soon..? Yes, in 2014 Palgrave and Macmillan are going to be publishing a new text-book that I have authored called *Online Methods for Psychologists*; that's the working title. It's an attempt to give students a grounding in the key issues: why we should use online research, how we use it, where to use it, the good points, the bad points and a working practical guide on how to do online research using examples from my own work, and that of colleagues. When it's gone well, when it's gone less well and what you can learn from it.

Reflecting on my experiences with online methodologies throughout my work, it is clear to me that there is a need for increased education concerning the ethical issues that surround researching online and the practicalities of running these studies. Additionally, as health psychologists we need to actively increase awareness of the feasibility and advantages of online research to students including the ability to access stigmatised people, the ready availability of rich sources of in-depth data and the potential cost benefits. It is these advantages that will continue to motivate me to continue my PhD work examining the lives and experiences of women with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome.