

'Pracademia – A Complex Ethical World' by Jane Birkett, Senior Officer, National Crime Agency (NCA) and Senior Practitioner Fellow, Open University (OU)

*As a police practitioner have you considered carrying out an empirical research study? When you open Pandora's Box, does the word 'ethics' scare you to death? Don't fear – here is a simple starting point!*

Over the last three months I have been working as a Senior Practitioner Fellow with the OU, on a secondment opportunity from the NCA (just one of the law enforcement agencies in the UK committed to expanding knowledge and learning through research in the OU's Policing Consortium). I wrote a blog last month describing my experience and providing more details, if you're interested: <http://centre-for-policing.open.ac.uk/taxonomy/term/265/blog-%E2%80%98pracademia-%E2%80%93-world-opportunity%E2%80%99-jane-birkett-senior-officer-national-crime>

What struck me early on was the incredible importance of considering ethics when doing research, particularly when you're using human participants and examining a sensitive policing matter (I'm examining the relationship between the NCA's covert informant handlers and those informants that they handle). And so ensued an interesting conversation with my supervisor, Professor Graham Pike, on ethical considerations from both an academic and a practitioner perspective – there is lots of cross over but also some potential conflict between the disciplines. For example, what if a participant discloses something to me that would ordinarily be protected by researcher confidentiality boundaries but as a practitioner it requires exposing because of organisational codes?

So I looked in to it... and kept looking... it seems there are a myriad of policies, procedures, regulations and laws that govern both practitioners and academics alike. There's even some interesting case law describing the battle some institutions have had with their promise of confidentiality to participants (for example, 'The Belfast Project' run by Boston College in the U.S.). In a nutshell, 'pracademics' get the best (or worst, depending how you see it!) of all worlds – being bound by their organisation's policy, perhaps a wider Civil Service or Policing Code, plus the academic institution's guidelines, *plus* national ethics guidelines. It can make your brain swirl.

In an attempt to relieve the confusion – after all, when words like, 'disclosure', 'confidentiality', 'informed consent', 'anonymisation', 'withdrawal', 'briefing', 'debriefing' and 'risks' are flying around it does get somewhat overwhelming – I have written a paper exploring the topic and, possibly of more use, created a simple 'pracademic' checklist to try to ensure that all of these important factors are considered. You can use my checklist [<insert link here>](#) (I won't charge you!!), which I do hope helps organise your thoughts and points you in the right direction of which policies and guidelines you need to adhere to. You can also read my paper [<insert link here>](#); do make sure you've made a nice cuppa before you settle in though!

The upshot is that, whilst this topic can loom over you as you are in the early research development and preparation stages, if you get your head around it and nail down your boundaries and requirements then the rest of your study should run smoothly!