




OPEN ACCESS

# Ethics of not knowing who we are talking to in qualitative research

Mehrunisha Suleman <sup>1</sup>, Mayuri Gogoi,<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Moss,<sup>3</sup> Carol Rivas,<sup>3</sup> Holly Reilly,<sup>2</sup> Katherine Woolf,<sup>3</sup> Manish Pareek,<sup>2</sup> I-CARE Study Collaborative Group

<sup>1</sup>Nuffield Department of Population Health, Ethox Center, Oxfordshire, UK  
<sup>2</sup>University of Leicester, Leicester, UK  
<sup>3</sup>University College London, London, UK

## Correspondence to

A/Prof Mehrunisha Suleman;  
mehrunisha.suleman@ethox.ox.ac.uk

Received 18 February 2026  
Accepted 8 June 2026

## ABSTRACT

The increasing use of online methods in qualitative research, alongside the growing availability of artificial intelligence tools, has raised concerns about whether researchers can be certain who they are speaking to. These concerns are often framed in terms of ‘imposter’ or ‘fraudulent’ participants, with proposed responses focusing on detection and verification. This paper argues that such framing mischaracterises the ethical landscape. It presumes that authenticity can be reliably established in contexts where uncertainty is often unavoidable, risks excluding participants whose circumstances or communication styles do not align with normative expectations and reshapes the research relationship in ways that amplify existing power asymmetries. Drawing on relational ethics, ethics of care and accounts of epistemic injustice, the paper proposes a reframing of these encounters as ‘uncertain encounters’. It suggests that, rather than treating uncertainty solely as a threat to data integrity, it can be understood as a feature of contemporary qualitative research that requires careful ethical engagement. The paper develops a proportionate approach in which verification is guided by the potential consequences of inauthentic participation rather than being applied routinely. It argues that uncertain accounts may still hold analytic value, particularly in studies concerned with meanings, narratives and social imaginaries. The paper concludes by outlining practical and institutional implications, including the need for reflexive practice, collective deliberation and greater transparency in reporting.

## INTRODUCTION

Physical proximity to participants in qualitative research used to afford researchers a certain assurance. You met people in person, watched their expressions sharpen or soften, felt the cadence of the room and trusted that this shared physical space told you something true about who they were. Those assurances are slipping away. As funding tightens and remote working practices adopted during the pandemic have become embedded, more qualitative work is conducted online. Sensitive topics often make cameras optional. Digital recruitment carries study adverts far beyond intended communities. And in the age of artificial intelligence (AI), tools like ChatGPT can generate or refine polished narratives on almost any topic. Across research teams, a quiet unease has been growing. Many find themselves asking whether we always know who we are talking to.

The dominant response has been to label these uncertain encounters as ‘imposter participants’, a term now appearing with increasing frequency

across the qualitative research literature.<sup>1</sup> There is, however, no settled or widely accepted definition of what constitutes an ‘imposter participant’ in qualitative research. The term is used inconsistently, variously referring to deliberate misrepresentation of eligibility, identity or experience or to suspected inauthenticity inferred from narrative features or recruitment patterns. These usages often collapse very different phenomena under a single label and rely on assumptions about intention and deception that are difficult to substantiate in online research contexts. Much of the emerging guidance treats this as a threat to data integrity and recommends more stringent detection and verification measures. Some accounts describe how incentives have attracted large numbers of inauthentic expressions of interest.<sup>2</sup> While financial incentives are often highlighted, participation may also be motivated by curiosity, trolling, ideological positioning or a belief that one can legitimately represent the experiences of others. Others emphasise the growing role of technology and recommend systematic red-flag screening<sup>3</sup> alongside accounts of the significant logistical and emotional burden placed on researchers confronting suspected fabrication.<sup>4</sup>

Recent social science work has begun to critically interrogate this framing. For example, Garcia-Iglesias *et al*<sup>5</sup> propose the term ‘suspected participants’ to foreground the researcher’s role in judging authenticity and to develop a more reflexive epistemology of participation, while Merchant *et al*<sup>6</sup> call for a broader social science intervention that shifts attention from detection and exclusion towards questions of inclusion, authority and knowledge production. These contributions highlight concerns about the inadequacy of the ‘imposter’ label, the exclusionary effects of screening practices and the need for greater reflexivity in how researchers interpret and respond to uncertainty.

However, we argue that the dominant ‘imposter’ framing misdescribes the ethical landscape. While recent work has begun to challenge the language of imposters and emphasise reflexivity and inclusion, this paper extends these arguments by reframing such encounters not only as epistemological problems but also as fundamentally ethical ones. In particular, it develops the concept of ‘uncertain encounters’ to foreground how uncertainty itself reshapes the ethical relationship between researcher and participant and to propose a proportionate approach grounded in relational ethics, care and epistemic justice. It assumes that researchers can reliably distinguish the ‘authentic’ from the



© Author(s) (or their employer(s)) 2026. Re-use permitted under CC BY. Published by BMJ Group.

**To cite:** Suleman M, Gogoi M, Moss R, *et al*. *J Med Ethics* Epub ahead of print: [please include Day Month Year]. doi:10.1136/jme-2026-111881

'inauthentic', compresses complex motivations into a binary of truth versus deception and positions researchers as gatekeepers of identity while casting participants as potential contaminants. In doing so, it risks excluding precisely the people qualitative research often aims to understand. This is not an argument for abandoning concerns about research integrity or methodological rigour. On the contrary, questions about who we are speaking to go to the heart of validity, trustworthiness and ethical responsibility in qualitative research. The challenge is not whether integrity matters but how it is best protected in contexts where certainty about identity is increasingly difficult to secure.

The language of 'fraudulent' or 'imposter' participation also reshapes the social relationship between researcher and participant. It suggests opposition rather than encounter, positioning participants as potential deceivers and implicitly elevating researchers to a vantage point from which they can judge the truthfulness of another person's story. This intensifies existing power imbalances and recasts the qualitative interview as a site of surveillance rather than meaning-making, with the potential to further deepen the mistrust that many under-represented groups already feel towards researchers. It reflects a wider drift towards efficiency, clean data, swift recruitment and neat eligibility boundaries, as though people exist primarily to supply usable information. Yet qualitative work has never been about purity. People bring uncertainty, partiality, contradiction, aspiration and messiness. These are not flaws to be solved; they are the very materials qualitative research is designed to understand.

Recognising this does not mean abandoning methodological standards. Rather, engaging openly with uncertainty can strengthen them, as it reflects a core principle of high-quality qualitative research, reflexive attention to the limits of what can be known, and transparency in how interpretations are reached. It means accepting that uncertainty may offer a more truthful and humane framing than labels such as 'fraudulent' or 'imposter' and that such uncertainty preserves the relational, interpretive space on which qualitative inquiry depends. From an ethical perspective, this shift aligns with relational and care-based frameworks<sup>7</sup> that emphasise mutual trust, attentiveness and the asymmetries of power embedded in research encounters. This analysis draws on relational approaches to research ethics, ethics of care and accounts of epistemic injustice, each of which foregrounds the moral significance of trust, attentiveness and the unequal distribution of credibility across social groups. Together, these perspectives emphasise that ethical research practice is not only a matter of procedural safeguards but also of how researchers interpret, engage with and assign value to participants' accounts. Framing participants primarily as potential deceivers risks amplifying these asymmetries, particularly for those already subject to surveillance in healthcare, welfare or migration systems.

This paper argues that framing uncertain participation as 'imposter' or 'fraudulent' is ethically problematic for three reasons. First, it presumes that researchers can reliably distinguish authentic from inauthentic accounts in contexts where such certainty is often unavailable. Second, it risks unjustly excluding participants whose modes of communication, circumstances or vulnerabilities do not align with normative expectations of credibility. Third, it reshapes the research relationship in ways that amplify power asymmetries, positioning researchers as arbiters of truth and participants as potential deceivers. In response, this paper proposes a reframing of such encounters as 'uncertain encounters' and develops a proportionate ethical approach grounded in relational ethics, care and epistemic justice.

### Why the imposter frame is too narrow

Calling someone an imposter implies intention, clarity and proof. In reality, online encounters rarely offer such certainty. A participant who struggles to describe their workplace may be fabricating or may simply be overwhelmed. Someone who repeats familiar phrases may be drawing on AI tools or on scripts used in everyday life. A participant who keeps their camera off may fear scrutiny or live in a shared space where privacy is impossible. Features sometimes used to flag AI-generated text, such as particular grammatical patterns or phrasing, may also reflect neurodivergence or other differences in communication style.

The literature often lists indicators of suspected fraud, such as rapid email responses, formulaic wording, reluctance to use video and inconsistencies in narrative,<sup>1 8–10</sup> but these same features can also reflect vulnerability, stigma, disability, fear of exposure or economic precarity. This concern has also been raised in recent social science critiques, which note that so-called 'red flags' may reflect cultural difference, vulnerability or structural inequality rather than deception and that efforts to screen out participants risk reproducing exclusion and mistrust.<sup>6</sup> Researchers note that stringent verification can disproportionately harm already marginalised groups<sup>1</sup> and may exclude participants such as undocumented migrants or others who fear engagement with government or institutional systems. Overemphasis on detecting inauthenticity can also reshape the research encounter itself, undermining researchers' ability to 'come to know' participants.<sup>11</sup>

Taken together, this raises questions about the limits of strict eligibility screening in online qualitative research. For participants from marginalised or precarious communities, initial uncertainty or hesitancy may reflect fear, prior experiences of surveillance or uncertainty about how data will be used rather than misrepresentation. In such contexts, the ethical and methodological skills of the researcher become particularly important. Reassurance about anonymity and confidentiality, time spent building rapport and allowing participants to settle into the research encounter may be more effective than increasingly stringent screening. Where participants are especially vulnerable, recruitment and engagement strategies may need to be more carefully designed, for example, through prior relationship building, collaboration with trusted intermediaries or participatory approaches, rather than moving immediately to formal online interviews.

Online research removes many of the contextual cues that once grounded researchers' judgements, forcing a confrontation with how much former certainty depended not on textual accuracy but on embodied presence. The problem is not deception. The problem is our expectation of certainty.

The ethical concern, therefore, is not only that such indicators may be unreliable but also that their interpretation is shaped by existing social norms about credibility and legitimacy. Participants whose communication styles, linguistic patterns or life circumstances fall outside these norms may be disproportionately subject to suspicion. This raises concerns of epistemic injustice, whereby certain speakers are afforded less credibility, not on the basis of evidence, but because of structural inequalities and implicit assumptions. In this light, the problem is not simply methodological uncertainty, but the risk that efforts to eliminate it may reproduce exclusion and mistrust. In this respect, calls for a more reflexive epistemology of participation are particularly important, as they highlight how judgements about authenticity are shaped not only by evidence but also by researchers' assumptions, positionality and disciplinary norms.<sup>5</sup>

### Reframing uncertainty as an incidental finding

A more constructive approach is to treat uncertain encounters as a form of incidental finding. Something unexpected arises in the interview. It does not neatly fit eligibility criteria and may generate discomfort or doubt, but it can still tell us something about the social world a participant inhabits, the pressures shaping how they present themselves or the shared scripts circulating online. Someone who appears inauthentic may still be offering meaningful data. Their narrative may illuminate financial insecurity, stigma, desperation or aspiration. They may reveal how people relate to institutions that often fail them or show how AI tools are becoming part of everyday expression. This is not contamination. It is context.

Importantly, uncertainty does not affect all forms of qualitative research in the same way. In studies exploring meanings, experiences or social imaginaries, analytic attention often rests less on verifying biographical facts than on understanding how narratives are constructed and what they reveal about wider social worlds. In such contexts, uncertainty may shape interpretation without necessarily invalidating findings. By contrast, where claims depend heavily on specific lived experiences, institutional roles or diagnostic categories, uncertainty carries greater analytic consequences and requires more careful handling and transparent reporting.

Reframing uncertain encounters as a form of incidental finding shifts the ethical and analytic focus. Rather than treating uncertainty primarily as a threat to data integrity, it invites consideration of what such encounters reveal about the social and technological conditions in which research takes place. This reframing does not deny the importance of methodological rigour. Instead, it recognises that in many qualitative contexts, meaning is not reducible to verifiable biography and that narratives may hold analytic value even when their factual status is uncertain.

Importantly, this reframing does not resolve the practical difficulty of distinguishing between ‘certain’ and ‘uncertain’ encounters. In many cases, such distinctions are neither stable nor reliably identifiable, and attempts to categorise participants too sharply may themselves generate further uncertainty or distrust. Indeed, as many researchers have observed in practice, initial suspicion can easily extend beyond particular cases, creating a broader erosion of trust in the research encounter.

Rather than offering a definitive method for identifying uncertain encounters, this approach suggests a shift in orientation. It recognises that uncertainty may be a feature of all qualitative data to varying degrees and that the task is not to separate ‘authentic’ from ‘inauthentic’ accounts with certainty but to engage reflexively with how trust and doubt are negotiated in interpretation. This involves holding participants’ accounts with both openness and critical attentiveness and being transparent about how judgements are made, rather than assuming that uncertainty can be fully eliminated through screening or verification.

### An ethics for an era of not knowing

At its core, qualitative research is built on skilful attention. Researchers know how to ask questions that invite elaboration, how to sit with hesitations, and how to return gently to a detail that does not quite settle. These practices allow uncertainty to surface and be explored, rather than policed. These questions are particularly salient in health and healthcare research, where qualitative methods are widely used to understand patient experiences, professional practices and sensitive or stigmatised conditions. In such contexts, participants may have strong reasons to withhold identifying information, adapt their narratives or

engage with research in indirect ways. Approaches that prioritise strict verification risk excluding precisely those voices that are most important for ethical and policy-relevant inquiry.

There are times when verification is necessary, but it should be proportional rather than automatic. Not every study requires identity checks, institutional email addresses or proof of diagnosis. In exploratory work, imposing such requirements can inadvertently exclude the very people research aims to understand. Verification may be ethically justified where participation confers significant benefit, findings inform high-stakes policy decisions or misrepresentation would meaningfully distort interpretation. It should be guided by the consequences of inauthentic participation, not by a desire for control.

A proportionate approach requires that verification measures be justified by the potential ethical consequences of inauthentic participation. In studies where findings inform high-stakes clinical or policy decisions or where participation confers significant material benefit, more robust forms of verification may be warranted. However, in exploratory or interpretive research, the routine use of stringent verification risks undermining inclusion and trust without clear justification. Ethical practice, in this context, lies not in maximising certainty but in calibrating responses to the specific aims, risks and populations of each study.

The narratives offered in interviews are always, to some degree, constructed within the research encounter, shaped by context, interaction and participants’ prior experiences of articulating their stories. In health research in particular, such narratives may also be influenced by repeated clinical encounters and established ways of speaking about illness or identity. Recognising this, even accounts that appear rehearsed, partial or stylised may still hold analytic value. They can reflect collective scripts, circulating social imaginaries or aspirational identities and reveal the public understandings shaping how people think about illness, work or institutions. Dismissing such accounts solely because they do not align neatly with eligibility criteria risks losing insight into the social worlds participants inhabit. Removal of data should therefore remain exceptional and carefully considered.

Interpretation should also never rest with a single researcher alone.<sup>11</sup> Team-based reflection distributes responsibility, softens individual suspicion and creates space for collective reasoning and reflexivity. In an era where certainty is increasingly elusive, shared deliberation becomes an ethical practice in itself.<sup>12</sup>

Researchers are often navigating these dilemmas without institutional guidance. Ethics committees, funding bodies and journals have yet to articulate proportionate frameworks for responding to ‘uncertain encounters’, leaving teams to either avoid reporting these issues or adopt defensive practices that undermine trust. Rather than proposing a new category or formal terminology, this paper uses the language of uncertainty to reframe an issue that qualitative researchers have long navigated in practice.

Institutions should acknowledge uncertainty as inherent to qualitative research and provide guidance that avoids punitive responses. Policies should emphasise proportionality, relational engagement and transparency in reporting, recognising that protecting research integrity does not always mean eliminating ambiguity; sometimes it means documenting it openly.

This analysis also has implications for empirical ethics. While the argument developed here is primarily conceptual, it is grounded in the kinds of uncertainties that arise in practice when conducting qualitative research. Empirical ethics has long emphasised that ethical challenges are not only matters of

abstract principle but are encountered, interpreted and negotiated within specific research contexts. From this perspective, uncertainty is not simply a theoretical concern but something that actively shapes how researchers make decisions about inclusion, exclusion, interpretation and responsibility in real time.

Recognising this highlights the importance of reflexivity, collective deliberation and transparency as core ethical practices. It also suggests a need for further empirical work to examine how researchers respond to uncertain encounters in practice and how these responses may shape inclusion, trust and the production of knowledge. Situating the argument in relation to empirical ethics, therefore, reinforces the claim that ethical practice in qualitative research is inseparable from the conditions in which research is conducted.

### Recommendations

Practically, this suggests three shifts in qualitative practice. First, moving from default suspicion to reflexive attentiveness. Second, treating uncertainty as something to be documented and analysed rather than erased. Third, ensuring that decisions about inclusion, exclusion or data removal are collectively deliberated and transparently reported. These moves protect research integrity not by eliminating ambiguity but by engaging with it openly and ethically.

There is also a need for further empirical and ethical work in this area. We lack systematic research on how widespread uncertain participation is across qualitative methodologies, how researchers respond in practice and how these responses shape inclusion, exclusion and interpretation. Comparative work across disciplines, populations and modes of recruitment would help move the discussion beyond anecdote and anxiety towards proportionate, evidence-informed guidance.

These shifts also have implications for research governance. Ethics committees, funders and journals play a central role in shaping how uncertainty is understood and managed. Explicit recognition of uncertain encounters within guidance and reporting standards would support researchers to engage with these issues transparently rather than adopting defensive practices or omitting them altogether. Developing proportionate, context-sensitive guidance is therefore an important task for the field.

### CONCLUSION

The move from in-person to online qualitative research has changed the texture of our encounters. We now work with fewer cues, more distance and technologies that make expression both easier and more elusive. Yet the core ethical task remains the same, to listen with care, interpret with humility and recognise the dignity of the person behind the narrative, even when we are not certain who that person is. Uncertainty is not the enemy of qualitative research. It is its landscape. The challenge is to meet it ethically. By reframing 'imposter participation' as 'uncertain encounters', this paper offers a way of understanding a growing

methodological concern without defaulting to suspicion or exclusion. It suggests that uncertainty is not simply a problem to be solved but a condition to be engaged with ethically, analytically and transparently.

**Collaborators** I-CARE study collaborative group: Manish Pareek, Kath Woolf, Carol Woodhams, Sorin Krammer, Carol Rivas, Asta Medisaukaite, Anna Guyatt, Mehrunisha Suleman, Srinivasa (Vittal) Katikireddi, Padmasayee (Sayee) Papineni, Susie Lagrata, Chris Martin, Mayuri Gogoi, Nicola Burton-Brown, Becky Moss, Raman Mishra, Asad Masood, Holly Reilly and Vishant Modhwadia.

**Contributors** MS, MG, RM, CR and HR initially conceived of the idea of the paper. MS drafted the paper. MS, MG, RM, CR, HR, KW and MP all contributed to editing and finalising the paper. MS is the guarantor.

**Funding** This study was funded by Health and Social Care Delivery Research (NIHR157268).

**Competing interests** None declared.

**Patient consent for publication** Not applicable.

**Ethics approval** Not applicable.

**Provenance and peer review** Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

**Data availability statement** No data are available.

**Open access** This is an open access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 Unported (CC BY 4.0) license, which permits others to copy, redistribute, remix, transform and build upon this work for any purpose, provided the original work is properly cited, a link to the licence is given, and indication of whether changes were made. See: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

### ORCID iD

Mehrunisha Suleman <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8819-0659>

### REFERENCES

- Ridge D, Bullock L, Causer H, *et al.* 'Imposter participants' in online qualitative research, a new and increasing threat to data integrity? *Health Expect* 2023;26:941–4.
- Drysdale K, Wells N, Smith AKJ, *et al.* Beyond the challenge to research integrity: imposter participation in incentivised qualitative research and its impact on community engagement. *Health Sociol Rev* 2023;32:372–80.
- Medero K, Abdi H, Ford C. Detecting and Preventing Imposter Participants: Methods and Recommendations for Qualitative Researchers. *Qual Health Res* 2025;0:1–9.
- Mayer C, Tryon R, Ricks S, *et al.* Preventing fraudulent research participation: Methodological strategies and ethical impacts. *J Genet Couns* 2025;34:e70048.
- Garcia-Iglesias J, Heaphy B, Yodovich N, *et al.* Imposter Participants? Towards a Reflexive Epistemology of 'Suspected Participants'. *Int J Qual Methods* 2025;24:16094069251335497.
- Merchant AA, Atherton S, Garcia-Iglesias J. Imposter Participants: A Call for Social Science Intervention. *Social Res Online* 2026;31:138–48.
- Tronto J. *Moral boundaries: a political argument for an ethic of care*. New York: Routledge, 2020.
- Ridge D, Bullock L, Causer H, *et al.* 'Imposter participants' in online qualitative research, a new and increasing threat to data integrity? *Health Expectations* 2023;26:941–4.
- Santinele Martino A, Perrotta A, McGillion BJ. Who can you trust these days?: Dealing with imposter participants during online recruitment and data collection. *Qualitative Research* 2024;24:1291–301.
- Burwell N, Mbakop LC, Branch K, *et al.* Recruitment Strategies to Prevent Fraudulent Virtual Enrollment While Respecting Privacy in Vulnerable Populations. *Qual Health Res* 2025;0:1–10.
- Lough Dennell BL, Dowrick A, Evered JA, *et al.* Do you know who you are talking to? *Int J Qual Methods* 2025;24:1–10.
- Parker M. *Ethical problems and genetics practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.