

# Research ethics: what, why and how

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# What do we mean by 'ethics' in research?

- principles – e.g. 'Do no harm', beneficence
- code of conduct, standards of behaviour
- respecting the rights of others
- moral standards (but whose?)

# Why is research ethics important?

Important to consider the potential effects of how we conduct research:

- on participants
- others who may be indirectly affected
- on other researchers
- public trust in research
- ourselves, the School

# Approaches to ethical decision-making

## Deontological

Kantian; intrinsic reasoning – doing the right thing

Universal moral principles (But who decides these?)

Moral imperative – e.g. ‘do no harm’ (Not always clear cut)

## Utilitarianism

Cost-benefit analysis: benefitting the majority

At odds with some codes – e.g. Nuremberg Code

(Nuremberg Code warns against prioritising societal or scientific interests over the individual.

But: used to justify e.g. covert research where the research goals are important for society)

## ‘Ethics of Care’

Ethical action centres on interpersonal relationships of care

Focus is less on ‘what is just’ and more on ‘how to respond’

# How to conduct ethical research?

Researchers need to:

- Reflect on the ethical implications of their research
- Refer to:
  - Relevant frameworks, policies etc. E.g. LSE Research Ethics Policy
  - Disciplinary frameworks
  - Legal statutes (e.g. mental health, children), best practice
- Put in place any relevant safeguards
- Consider cultural/local norms

However....

...frameworks, policies, etc. can be generic

Every research project involves a unique combination of your:  
**research question + participants + context**

**Ethics review process** involves reflecting on the potential  
issues specific to your project

There isn't always a 'right' or 'wrong' way

Researchers have to make judgements, possible trade-offs

- but decisions should be informed/guided by frameworks

# Starting point (usually): participants

If you will be involving participants (or personal data):

e.g. for interviews, surveys, observations, etc.

- Who are they – any vulnerabilities, special considerations?
- How will you recruit them?
  - Inclusion/exclusion criteria? Avoiding bias, being inclusive
- Incentives: pros and cons
- Compensation (for time etc); benefits (why should they take part?)
- Use of social media data; visual data, etc: see guidance
- **Informed consent**

# Vulnerable participants

Extra care should be taken with vulnerable participants

Vulnerability may be due to: age, health, social marginalisation (e.g. religious beliefs, sexual orientation, etc.), power imbalance

Informed consent may need to be an ongoing process

Where applicable, obtain consent from parents/carers *and* participants

Vulnerable participants should not be *excluded* without reason



# Informed consent

You must ensure that participants understand:

- what the study is about
- what they are agreeing to
- that their participation is voluntary & can be withdrawn
- will they be anonymised/pseudonymised
- how their data might be used in the future

Guidance / sample templates:

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/infCon.pdf>

- **Written consent** preferable (can be electronic, e.g. email). Justification needed if not
- Verbal consent: may be more appropriate in some contexts, but you must provide the justification
- **Online surveys**: must have an explicit tick box to confirm they understand/agree

# Incentives & compensation

Incentives not always necessary, but are acceptable in some circumstances

Can be a good way to encourage participation and thank participants.

Should not be at a level to induce participants against their will or to risk any harm they would not normally face

Consider **compensation** for working time lost, difficulty/length of task, etc., especially for those in precarious economic circumstances

In some contexts, gifts-in-kind or contributions at community level may be more appropriate

See our guidance on incentives & other payments here:

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/research-and-innovation/research/Assets/Documents/PDF/ethics-incentives-reimbursement-etc-v5.pdf>

# Conducting interviews

In person: conduct interviews in a 'safe' place

Online/phone: other considerations (e.g. who might overhear?)

If topic is very sensitive...

- do you need training/practice interviews?
- consider the structure of the interview (don't end with most sensitive issues)
- check interviewee happy to continue

If interviewee discloses anything that raises significant concern (e.g. around harm to themselves or others), discuss with your supervisor/mentor - do not make a decision alone/break confidentiality without seeking advice

# Use of social media data

'Public' doesn't mean *carte blanche* for use in research

- consider the person's expectations

You still need to consider whether or not consent is required\*

'Lurking' considered unethical research behaviour

Forums: consider the effect the presence of a researcher might have

\*Guidance around ethics and consent when using internet and social media data:

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/research-and-innovation/research/Assets/Documents/PDF/ethics-Using-internet-and-Social-media-data-v8.pdf>

Guidance can also be found in the Research Data Toolkit:

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/internal/staffAndStudents/resDatManToo-B460.pdf>

# Ethnographic research

Often involves the researcher being immersed within a community

This can give rise to a number of considerations, eg.:

- How will consent be negotiated?

- How will the researcher fit in with and respect those they engage with?

- The risk of subjectivity

- How the research findings might impact the community?

Refer to the Association of Social Anthropologists ethical guidelines:

<https://www.theasa.org/ethics/>

# Anonymity & confidentiality

## Anonymity

Maintaining the anonymity of all research participants is the norm

Exceptions may be e.g. expert/elite interviewees, activists

Be careful about descriptions/identifiers that may lead to identification

## Confidentiality

Who else will see the raw data? Ensure this is clear to participants

The Research Data Toolkit has guidance on anonymising and protecting your data:

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/services/Policies-and-procedures/Assets/Documents/internal/staffAndStudents/resDatManToo-B460.pdf>

# Photography & video

Photos and video compromise anonymity; more intrusive

Blurring of faces / techniques to anonymise photos: ok, but be aware that may have negative connotations

Use of photographs and video: implications of informed consent:

- Do participants understand where/how/to whom images will be shown?
- Have all photographic/video subjects given consent?

In what contexts is it OK to take photos in public places? In private spaces?

# Use of deception in research

Used in e.g. psychological/behaviour studies where respondents may react very differently if they know the true purpose or full details about the research

Use of deception is only ethical if:

- There are very strong scientific grounds for it
- Effects/possible harm to participants has been fully considered
- Alternative procedures have been considered but not feasible
- Participants are 'de-briefed' at the earliest possible stage
- Participants are given the option to withdraw their data at the end



# Covert research

Covert research (that involves significant deception) is considered unethical in most circumstances

Exceptions may be where it is impossible to gain data in another way and there is an overwhelming benefit of the research

e.g. a pressing social problem with the possibility of positive intervention

Informed consent should generally be sought after the fact

Projects must be reviewed/approved by Research Ethics Committee

# Fieldwork

Consider:

- any local ethical or legal requirements;
- cultural norms and sensitivities;
- your own safety and that of your participants

Low and Middle Income Countries - pay particular attention to:

- power inequalities
- benefit sharing / risks of raising expectations
- over-researching a population?

Complete **Notification to Travel** (a Risk Assessment may also be required)

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/Risk-and-Compliance-Unit/Health-and-Safety/Overseas-Travel-Homepage>

Check your departmental/programme guidance

# Archival research

Ethics review is not required for research that will only use publicly available archival material

- unless it may give rise to ethical issues

E.g: research that digs up new information or brings to light a forgotten story about a living individual that involves sensitive issues (e.g. childhood abuse), especially where that individual may be vulnerable

Where the research does give rise to ethical issues, an ethics review should be completed

Researchers should consider the impact of naming individuals in the research outputs, whether consent may (or may not) be appropriate, etc.

# Ethics review: formal requirements

Ethics review is required for any study involving:

- Human participants (e.g. interviews, surveys, observations, social media data, etc)
- Use of data/datasets containing identifiable information (names, emails, usernames, etc.)
  - even if you plan to anonymise the data\*
- Research that might have negative repercussions for any individuals or groups

Online ethics submission system:

Automatically routes applications to Departmental or Research Ethics Committee review

**You must obtain approval before commencing any data collection**

You can monitor the status of your application online

Link to instructions/guidance:

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/research-and-innovation/research/research-ethics/Research-Ethics-Submission-System>

\* Ethics review is not required for research that will only be using publicly available archives, unless there are other reasons why it may give rise to ethical issues

# How to complete an ethics review well

See our guidance 'Ethics review considerations: A quick guide for researchers'

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/research-and-innovation/research/Assets/Documents/PDF/ethicsReviewConsiderations-QuickGuide.pdf>

Provide sufficient detail (and attach informed consent document/s, etc.)

Reflect and answer honestly (have you thought through 'what ifs' / possible safeguards?)

Not sure about something - just ask!

Research ethics review is **NOT** about:

form-filling, box-ticking, 'passing' or 'failing', being unnecessarily risk averse

It **IS** about:

reflecting on what you plan to do

getting feedback to improve those plans

being 'risk aware', planning safeguards

# When you've finished your project

Ethical considerations don't stop there

- Have you been transparent in documenting your methods?
- Have you been careful not to misrepresent your findings?
- Have you acknowledged the contribution of others?
- Are there any risks associated with publishing/disseminating your findings?  
(Any negative consequences for participants or others?)
- Have you reflected on possible misuse of your findings?

Be mindful of the LSE Code of Research Conduct & Ethics Code

<https://info.lse.ac.uk/staff/divisions/research-and-innovation/research/Research-integrity-at-LSE>

# Links & further guidance

Research ethics webpage: <http://www.lse.ac.uk/research-ethics>

Has links to:

- Research Ethics Policy & Code of Research Conduct
- Informed consent guidance/templates
- Research ethics review submission system
- Other useful resources

**Drop-in session every Thursday**, 3-4pm (on Zoom) for any questions on research ethics, data management, data protection, copyright

Register at: <https://apps.lse.ac.uk/training-system/userBooking/course/9287941>

Contact us at: [research.ethics@lse.ac.uk](mailto:research.ethics@lse.ac.uk)