The ethics of research in the social sciences: an overview

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Research Governance (Integrity) and Ethics

Research ethics and our policies in this area are focused on the moral perspective of how research is conducted, particularly when working with human or animal subjects. Researchers should adhere to codes of practice or regulations in this area and (where required) attend specific training or undertake ethical review processes prior to conducting research. Work in this area is overseen by the University Ethics Committee and each College also has an Ethics Committee and local points of contact. Research students should discuss this with their supervisor to identify appropriate training or procedures that should be followed.

Research integrity is focused on professional standards and responsible research conduct. It is relevant to researchers from all disciplines, as well as anyone supporting research (administrators, public engagement or communications specialists etc.). Training is available, and while this is mandatory for PGRs, and highly recommended for other research staff, all researchers have a professional responsibility to keep up to date with what this means for their discipline, and contribute to a culture of good research practice.
In order to maintain a climate of trust in the practice and outcomes of social research, it is inevitable that systems of ethical assurance will be established and will need to be maintained by all those engaged in work of this nature. The trust of the public, professional colleagues, those who commission and fund research and those being studied requires an effective system of ethical review, clear lines of responsibility and a manageable degree of independent overview. (Iphofen, 2011: p.5)

Moreover

Researchers, ROs and RECs should consider ethics issues throughout the lifecycle of a research project and promote a culture of ethical reflection, debate and mutual learning.

The lifecycle of research includes the planning and research design stage, the period of funding for the project, and all activities that relate to the project up to – and including – the time when funding has ended.

This includes knowledge exchange and impact activities, the dissemination process – including reporting and publication – and the archiving, future use, sharing and linking of data.
When research misconduct becomes public

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Frameworks

• **ESRC Framework for Research Ethics**
• **BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct.**
  • Code of Ethics and Conduct
  • Code of Human Research Ethics
• **British Sociological Association**
• **Social Research Association**
• **Social Policy Association**
• **Association of Social Anthropologists**
Ethical review application process

College Research Ethics Webpage:
http://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/

Information for applicants:
http://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/informationforapplicants/

Forms and Guidance Notes:
http://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/forms/

Who to contact

College Research Ethics Committee:
http://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/committee/ethicscontacts/
Some common issues

Responsibilities to research participants
Anonymity and Confidentiality
Informed Consent
Vulnerable People/groups
Lack of coherence across documentation
Limits to confidentiality: UEC stipulated clauses

Confidentiality will be respected subject to legal constraints and professional guidelines.

Confidentiality will be respected unless there are compelling and legitimate reasons for this to be breached. If this was the case we would inform you of any decisions that might limit your confidentiality.

Confidentiality may be limited and conditional – and the researcher has a duty of care to report to the relevant authorities possible harm/danger to participant or to others.

Assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

Sample considerations
Informed consent entails:
“.... giving sufficient information about the research and ensuring that there is no explicit or implicit coercion so that prospective participants can make an informed and free decision on their possible involvement. Information should be provided in a form that is comprehensible and accessible to participants, typically in written form, and time should be allowed for the participants to consider their choices and to discuss their decision with others if appropriate.” (ESRC, 2015)

Therefore - Consent needs to be:
- **Informed**: given in possession and understanding of the principal, relevant information;
- **Voluntary**: given freely and not as a result of coercive pressure (real or perceived);
- **Competent**: given by somebody able, in virtue of their age, maturity and mental stability, of making a free, considered choice.
Consent and Plain Language Statement (PLS)

Information about the nature and purpose of the research;
A statement that participation is voluntary, including the choice to opt out of the research at any time;
Information about the data collection method and the option to agree/refuse to being recorded (if applicable);
A description of the extent to which confidentiality will be maintained and an option to choose anonymity;
Data storage, sharing and access

Increasingly funders require data to be archived and made available to other genuine researchers with varying conditionality attached. Is this stated on PLS? Did you get specific consent for this? If yes, what are archival and access issues and conditions of use?

http://www.data-archive.ac.uk/create-manage/consent-ethics/legal?index=6
Documentation outlining consent has to differentiate between consent to participate and consent to allow data to be archived, re-used and shared. (UK Data Archive)

- I agree for the data I provide to be archived at the UK Data Archive/University of Glasgow Secure Data Repository.
- I understand that other genuine researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
- I understand that other genuine researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
Main sections on application form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 2 – Ethical Risks</th>
<th>Have potential risks been identified and addressed?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 7b – Research Methods</td>
<td>Data collection and analysis methods; time commitment and confidentiality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 8 – Confidentiality and data handling</td>
<td>Methods of protecting confidentiality and anonymity for each method applied; storage and security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 9 - Dissemination</td>
<td>To participants/peers; archiving and/or re-use</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 10 – Participants</td>
<td>Recruitment details, number(s), location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 11 – Permission to access participants</td>
<td>Often ‘to follow’, UoG students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Section 12 – Informed consent</td>
<td>PLS, special considerations, evidencing consent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 15 - Risk</td>
<td>Lone field work, sensitive topics, vulnerable groups</td>
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</tbody>
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Amendments to approved application

Notify the committee/forum, and obtain approval, if there are proposed:

• Changes to the study design.
• Changes to procedures undertaken by participants.
• Changes/addition to the key study documents.
• Changes to key/senior supervisory staff
• Changes to time-scale.
Where to access help

Familiarise yourself with guidance and information available on the College ethics site:
http://www.gla.ac.uk/colleges/socialsciences/students/ethics/

Information, advice and guidance can be obtained either from SEFs* and/or CREC*:
  * School Ethics Forum
  * College Research Ethics Committee

See also: UK Data Archive
Research Ethics Guidebook
Research Ethics Journal
Introduction to the Responsible Conduct of Research
“Social scientists do not have an unalienable right to conduct research involving other people (Oakes, 2002). That we continue to have the freedom to conduct such work depends on us acting in ways that are not harmful and are just. Ethical behaviour may help assure the climate of trust in which we continue our socially useful labours (AAAS, 1995; Jorgensen, 1971; Mitchell and Draper, 1982; PRE, 2002; Walsh, 1992). If we act honestly and honourably, people may rely on us to recognize their needs and sensitivities and consequently may be more willing to contribute openly and fully to the work we undertake.” (Israel and Hay, 2006: p3)