



Introduction

Ethics when applied to social research is concerned with the creation of a trusting relationship between those who are researched and the researcher. To ensure that trust is established it is essential that communication is carefully planned and managed, that risks are minimised and benefits are maximised.

In developing a trusting relationship, researchers adhere to a number of ethical principles which they apply to their work - namely beneficence; autonomy; non-maleficence; justice; veracity; and privacy.

Beneficence (doing good)

Research should only be carried out if some sort of benefit or good can be derived from it, (i.e. contribution to knowledge or improved service/treatment). Therefore the question of whether or not a research project is worth undertaking should always be uppermost in the mind of the researcher. If no benefit can be derived then the project is unethical.

Autonomy (self-rule)

Researchers have an obligation to disclose information at a level that participants can understand so that they can either refuse or agree to participate. In essence, autonomy is concerned with the concept of *informed consent* whereby people who agree to take part in a study know what they are agreeing to and authorise the researcher to collect information without any form of coercion.

Non-maleficence (do no harm)

The principle of non-maleficence places an obligation on researchers not to harm others or expose people to unnecessary risks. Harm can come in many forms, from blows to self-esteem to 'looking bad' to others, to loss of funding or earnings, to boredom, frustration, or time wasting. It is good practice to assume that every research project will involve some form of harm and to consider in advance how best to deal with it.

Justice (Fairness)

This principle implies that everyone should be treated fairly and equally.

Veracity (truth telling)

This principle concerns truth telling whereby the researcher is required to provide comprehensive and accurate information in a manner that enhances understanding. For example, if the researcher says that a questionnaire will take 10 minutes to complete then the questionnaire should take 10 minutes and not 15 minutes. Researchers should always be honest with participants and keep any promises made.

Privacy

Privacy concerns the respect for limited access to another person, be it physically, emotionally or cognitively. For example, although participants grant access to their thoughts and feelings when they agree to participate, they do not agree to unlimited access. Therefore they have always got the right to decline to talk about certain issues or to answer specific questions.



Confidentiality is an extension of privacy but relates specifically to the agreements made between the researcher and participants about what can and cannot be done with information collected over a course of a project. In most cases this will be determined and subjected to the legal constraints outlined in the Data Protection Act 1998.

Frequently asked questions

This section of the guide attempts to answer some of the frequently asked questions about research ethics. If you have any additional queries please get in touch.

What is meant by informed consent?

Informed consent is best understood by looking at what it means to be informed and to give consent. Being informed means that participants are told everything that might or will occur during a study in a way in which they can understand. Giving consent implies that a) the agreement to participate is voluntary, free from coercion and undue influence and b) that the person providing the consent is competent to make a rational and mature judgement about taking part. If the criteria of being informed and giving consent are met then informed consent is said to be given.

Does consent have to be in writing?

It is good practice to have consent in writing. In practice, however, this is not always possible especially when undertaking focus groups. The convention here is to go through the consent procedure with the group and record on tape any objections. To prevent breaches of confidentiality, consent forms with personal identifiable information attached should be stored in a locked container away from information about the project.

What information should be included on a consent form?

There are no hard and fast rules here; however as a rough guide the following sorts of things should be included:

- a heading stating the title, the organisation carrying out the research and the name of the researcher.
- a statement of agreement to participate.
- a statement that indicates the length of time an activity is likely to take.
- a statement that indicates what will happen to the information collected.
- a statement about confidentiality and anonymity.
- confirmation that there is no obligation to take part and that participants have the right to withdraw or not answer questions.
- signatures and date.

Optional statements that can be included:

- a statement that the purpose of any recording equipment used has been explained.
- a statement that a leaflet has been provided, that the information has been read and understood.
- a statement that indicates that permission has been granted to re-contact participants about the project.
- a statement that indicates whether permission has been granted for their name to be added to a database etc.



Are there any special issues I need to consider when undertaking research with young people?

Yes, the issue of informed consent and how to ensure it has led to various professional, academic and service guidelines on how to undertake research with young people. We have pulled together some of the key issues you need to be aware of in a separate guideline. See 'Research with children and young people' for further details.

Do I need to get ethical approval for my research?

This question very much depends on the subject area and who you are actually consulting with. You generally don't need ethical approval if you adhere to the community engagement framework and your research is being undertaken within the council for the purpose of improving service provision. However, if you are undertaking collaborative work with one of our partner agencies, i.e. NHS, you may need to apply for ethical review. The Central Office for Research Ethics Committees (COREC) produces guidance on who should apply for ethical review, (see <http://corec.org.uk/?s=ethical+review>). The best advice here is 'if in doubt ask'.

What next?

If you would like to know more about this topic or any other aspect of research or consultation, please contact us:

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