Research Ethics

Who Is This For?

This session is aimed at developing your academic skills, and improve your knowledge of the importance of ethical research. You will be able to apply this advice and information directly to any essays/assignments/research projects you will be given during your time at University.

What Are We Going To Cover?

1. Ethics explained (Definitions, Frameworks & Research)
2. Ethics in your own research (Surveys, Online Data, Interviews & Storage)

Aims and Objectives

Aim of session:

To gain an awareness of the importance of ethical considerations when undertaking research.

Objectives:

By the end of the session, you will have:

- Looked at some commonplace ethical issues.
- Reflected on the implications for ethical research on your own work/ project.

What is Research Ethics?

The key principles are:

- Research should be designed to ensure integrity and quality
- Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the research
- Confidentiality and anonymity of respondents must be respected
- Research participants must take part free from coercion and by their own volition
- Any harm to research participants must be avoided
The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest/partiality must be explicit.

We must consider the rightness and wrongness of our actions as qualitative researchers in relation to the people whose lives we are studying, to our colleagues, and to those who sponsor our work [...] Naivété [about ethics] itself is unethical.


Ethical Frameworks

We will be discussing the following four ethical frameworks:

01 Procedural Ethics
02 Situational Ethics
03 Relational Ethics
04 Exiting Ethics

Procedural Ethics
This is a framework that large organisations need to follow.
The Institutional Review Board suggest:

➢ Do no harm

➢ Avoid deception

➢ Negotiate informed consent

➢ Ensure privacy and confidentiality

Research participants have a right to know the nature and potential consequences of the research.

**Situational Ethics**

A framework that takes into account individual circumstances or situations.

Remember that:

➢ Each situation is different so researchers will have to respond to this in their ethical reviews.

➢ What might be considered ‘ethical’ in a previous situation might not be ethical any more – keep asking questions of your research!

**Relational Ethics**

A framework that deals with the people of research or participants.

Researchers have a duty of care to their participants and should consider:

➢ Allowing them to feedback/raise issues at any point

➢ Using pseudonyms instead of the participants real names

➢ Allowing the participants to edit oral interviews once they are typed up into a transcript

➢ Giving them the opportunity to ‘opt out’

**Exiting Ethics**

Researchers must consider how their research may be read, understood and used after the data collection stage.
Consider:

➢ How the research may impact participants
➢ How the research may impact readers
➢ How the research may impact the wider community

How to Ensure Ethical Research

The Key Principles of Ethical Research

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<td>Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion.</td>
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Ethics in Your Research

Surveys

When it comes to conducting your own research, the first thing you need to consider is whether you are collecting your data in an ethical manner.

One way you can do this is through the use of surveys. Surveys are a popular way of collecting a diverse range of data from a study group, however there are some important points to consider about their construction.

1. **First of all, you need to design your survey well.** Don’t make it overly lengthy or people will be less inclined to fill it in or write full answers. Think instead about what data you would like to receive and how that data will be used. You might also want to include a space for participants to include their contact details in case you need to discuss the survey with them at a later date.

2. **Consider the wording of participant information sheets and consent forms carefully.** Ensure that you are asking for appropriate consent for the intended use of the data collected.

3. **Take extra care when collecting /using sensitive personal data.** Sensitive personal data can be used for research purposes, but think ethically about how you collect, analyse and use this data. As we spoke about earlier – do you need to anonymise the data? And as we’ll go on to discuss, how are you going to store this data securely so that it isn’t stolen or leaked?

If you decide to collect your survey data online, you need to make sure that this is done in a manner that complies with the Data Protection Act. If the survey collects the identity of the person filling it out (e.g. email address, name, phone number, etc.) this data must be held within the EEA
In practical terms, this means not using surveymonkey.com or similar websites. Instead consider using websites such as www.survey.leeds.ac.uk.

Gathering Data Online

➢ Read the Association of Internet Researchers' Ethics Guide.

➢ Be aware of data protection and security issues.

Just because data is ‘published’ online doesn’t mean it has been ethically approved.

You will need to think about how you would obtain informed consent from online participants. Privacy and confidentiality must still be respected.

Oral Interviews

You might want to collect your data through oral interviews. This is when you visit a person, conduct an interview, and record it. You will need to transcribe this interview as accurately as possible, however what you choose to include from your interview in your final project needs to be considered ethically. Consequently, you need to:

- Ensure that the interviewee knows that they are being recorded and has given their consent. Get written confirmation that the interviewee has given their permission for you to use the recordings and transcripts of the recordings in your research.

- Stop recording if or when the interviewee asks. This is common courtesy. You need to take the interviewee’s emotional wellbeing into account – if you are discussing something difficult, your participant is well within their rights to ask you to stop recording.

- Send the interviewee the finished transcript of their interview, so that they can edit out any pieces that they don’t want you to include. Interviews can often flow like conversations and, if you’re a good interviewer, you might find your participant telling you all kinds of stories! This kind of personal information could have an emotional (or legal!) impact. Allowing your interviewees, the opportunity to check and confirm the information (and the peace of mind that comes with it) is good ethical practice.
Storing Data

Finally, you want to make sure that you are storing your data properly. In order to do this, you must keep all of the documentation relating to your project in one place. Any information which may allow anonymous participants to be identified must be stored securely (this includes consent forms!), and all data from your project must be kept for three years. This means that, if anyone asks to see any of your data for up to three years after collecting it, you should be able to find it and access it easily. I have found that the best way to do this is to buy a large, encrypted PEN drive, so that all your data can be stored on there and is also password protected.

Summary

Remember the following key information:

- Good research is ethical research, the two cannot be separated!
- Ethical research should be designed to ensure integrity and quality.
- Research subjects should be fully informed and give their written consent.
- You must consider how your research might harm your participants and take steps to avoid this (e.g. safely storing data, allowing them to edit interviews, anonymising results, etc.)
- You should make sure that your methods of collecting data are fair, sensitive and transparent.

Further Reading

3. What is Ethics in Research & Why is it Important?