

Specialist Research Ethics Guidance Paper

ETHICAL INTERNATIONAL AND INTERCULTURAL RESEARCH

Undertaking research in countries other than the researcher's own, or research involving participants who are from cultures/backgrounds other than the researcher's own, can raise a range of ethical challenges and considerations. This guidance is based around ten guiding principles, which have been developed with these types of research in mind; however, they can also be considered as good guiding principles for any research project involving people (or their data/tissue), regardless of where it is carried out, or who it involves.

This guidance is supplementary to the University's [Ethics Policy Governing Research Involving Human Participants, Personal Data and Human Tissue](#).

The 10 Guiding Principles – in brief

1. Do no harm – before, during or after the research
2. Understand the local context and culture
3. Be honest
4. Be aware of power relations
5. Ensure voluntary participation
6. Ensure appropriate mechanisms for obtaining informed consent
7. Think carefully about how you will collect, record and manage your data
8. Take steps to anticipate, mitigate and address safeguarding concerns
9. Be as open and transparent as possible
10. Aim to create a legacy

The 10 Guiding Principles with explanatory notes

1. Do no harm – before, during or after the research

This is an essential ethical principal for any research - as researchers we have a duty of care and a moral obligation to respect the people, communities and environments we are researching and to avoid/mitigate potential risks as far as possible.

Before: It is important to think about the ethical implications of a research project, and how to manage potential safeguarding risks, right from the start of the planning process, so this is built into the research design.

Going through a process of ethical review and approval is essential for any research which involves human participants, personal data or human tissue, but it is also a useful mechanism to help you consider the details of how the research will be carried out, and the potential risks to participants' safety and wellbeing. It also enables you to obtain valuable input from experienced staff/colleagues.

For research undertaken overseas, you should check whether there is a requirement to obtain formal ethics approval locally. However, even if not a formal requirement, it is good practice to involve local people, such as community leaders, in dialogue about ethics arrangements as part of the planning process.

Although the ethical review process primarily focuses on the safety and wellbeing of participants, you should also consider your own safety and well-being as a researcher, and that of others who may be involved in, or affected by your research. A risk

assessment should be undertaken for any research that will take place off-campus, and appropriate routes for people to raise any safeguarding concerns should be put in place (see Principle 8).

Further information about managing safeguarding risks is provided under Principle 8.

During: Although the formal process of ethical review and approval takes place before the research commences, it is important for the ethical implications of the research to be considered throughout the project. For example, informed consent should be considered an on-going process, and you should ensure you check regularly that participants remain happy to participate at each stage of their involvement.

If it comes to light that a change needs to be made to the terms that were set out in the original ethics application (e.g. if the approved informed consent process proves to be problematic due to a specific cultural norm which was not foreseen), approval for an amendment to the application should be sought wherever possible. This will ensure that the ethical implications of this can be considered fully.

However, it is not possible to foresee and plan for every eventuality, so in some instances, you may be required to make the best ethically-led decision you can about how to proceed. This may mean that there is no possibility of seeking prospective approval for a change to the terms of the ethics application (e.g. should an issue arise during an interview with a participant, which requires an immediate adaptation of the approach set out in the application).

After: It is also important to think about any potential for harm to arise after the research has ended, and take steps to manage any risks of the research having a negative impact on individual participants or the broader researched community (including the potential long-term impact of the research) (see Principle 10).

2. **Understand the local context and culture**

When carrying out research in a context with which you are unfamiliar it is important to draw on published material where available, and to consult with other researchers (from the University of Sheffield or elsewhere) who have experience of working in the relevant context, wherever possible.

Where appropriate and feasible, it is good practice to co-design and develop research plans with local partners. This may include researchers from institutions local to where the research is to be carried out and other relevant stakeholder organisations (such as charities/NGOs). However, understanding the diversity of stakeholders in a given context is also important given that they may operate under differing ethical and legal frameworks. It should also, wherever possible, involve consulting with individuals who can directly represent the community/ies to be involved in the research (such as community leaders or religious leaders). Involving those with a good understanding of the local economy, environment, culture, politics and societal norms can be invaluable in ensuring the success of your research.

It is important to be aware that what is deemed 'ethical' in one culture or context may not be so in another. For example, in the UK, it is standard practice to obtain written informed consent from research participants to confirm that they agreed to take part in the research. However, this may be seen as inappropriate in some cultures or contexts, where witnessed oral consent may be a better approach.

It is also important to check whether there are any legal/regulatory issues presented by your proposed research, or other official permissions or approvals that may be required (for overseas research advice may be sought from the local British embassy). You should also be aware of the political situation and how this may impact on the research activity – seek advice if necessary (e.g. from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office).

3. Be honest

Ensure you are honest about the aims of the research and its potential risks and benefits to participants and/or communities, and the potential impact on their lives. Don't make promises that you are not sure you will be able to keep. Openly declare any (potential) conflicts of interest which could (or could be perceived to) compromise the trustworthiness of the research.

4. Be aware of power relations

Research participants may feel that there is an imbalance of power between themselves and the researcher, and this may have an impact on their engagement with the research, and on ethical concepts such as freely-given consent and expectations of the benefits of research. For example, they may feel under more pressure to participate, or they may mistakenly feel that the researcher has the power to improve their situation. This is more likely to arise in projects involving disadvantaged communities or those from low-income countries.

Careful consideration should be given to minimising the impact of any power relations (whether real or perceived). The input of those with experience of undertaking research in the relevant context, and/or those who can represent the relevant community/ies, are invaluable in developing an appropriate approach. However, power relationships may also exist within the hierarchies of the communities you are researching, so be aware of the potential for marginalised groups to be underrepresented by community groups/leaders.

5. Ensure voluntary participation

Careful consideration should be given to how to ensure that potential participants understand fully what the research is about, what they are being asked to do, any risks that participation presents, and what will happen to the information that they provide. It must be made clear that they are free to choose whether or not to participate, with no negative consequences should they decide not to take part. Again, the input of those with experience of undertaking research in the relevant context, and/or those who can represent the relevant community/ies, are invaluable in developing an appropriate approach.

It is important to be careful when using incentives to encourage participation; again, local advice should be sought, to ensure that the incentive offered is appropriate, and not enough to encourage people to take risks that they would not otherwise be comfortable with in their everyday lives.

It is also important to be aware of the role of 'gatekeepers' in certain contexts, and to ensure that individuals are still able to give free and voluntary consent, even where a community leader or head of family/household may have given formal consent for the community and/or the individual to be involved in the research.

6. Ensure appropriate mechanisms for obtaining informed consent

Consider carefully how to ensure that information is provided in a way that is appropriate for the participant, and that consent is sought in a culturally-appropriate way (see Principle 2), bearing in mind the languages/dialects used by the community and the literacy levels of the target population where relevant. Again, the input of other researchers with relevant experience, or members of the community to be researched, is invaluable. For example, information about the research may need to be presented orally rather than in written form where participants may be illiterate.

If the research is to be carried out by a researcher who does not speak the participants' own language, there will be a need to consider the involvement of an official translator/interpreter, or a member of the local community who can introduce the researcher to potential participants and help with translation and understanding. In such cases it is important to be aware of the potential for misinterpretation or for the interpreter to not fully explain the research to the potential participant. Time should be taken to ensure the interpreter is given a full understanding of the research and the process of data collection, as well as the expectations regarding the information which should be given to participants.

Informed consent should also be seen as an on-going process, rather than a one-off agreement to take part (see Principle 1: During).

7. Think carefully about how you will collect, record and manage your data

Considering and documenting what data you will collect, and how you will store and use it, is an essential element of any research project (both the ethics review process and a data management plan are useful in this regard). It is of particular importance when personal data (i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified) is being collected as the requirements of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Data Protection Act (2018) (or equivalents in other countries outside the UK/EU) must be met (see Research Ethics Guidance Paper: 'Principles of Anonymity, Confidentiality and Data Protection').

Extra care needs to be taken with this when planning fieldwork in unfamiliar locations, and recording and storing your research data safely can be particularly challenging when working in regions with poor technical infrastructure and limited internet connectivity. Portable devices such as laptops and dictaphones should be encrypted, particularly when using them to store personal data.

If your research will involve a translator/interpreter, then make sure that you have provided them with sufficient information about the project, and provide clear expectations in terms of the information that should be passed on to participants. If you don't have access to a translator, then be aware that free online translation services are often of poor quality. Even if you are able to translate data yourself, take care not to alter the sense of a participants' words in doing so.

8. Take steps to anticipate, mitigate and address safeguarding concerns

All those involved in the University's research and innovation activities have a right to be treated fairly with dignity and respect, and to work or participate in safe research and innovation environments, which are free from sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment, bullying, psychological abuse and physical violence.

Researchers have an obligation to take steps to anticipate and mitigate any potential safeguarding concerns, and to provide appropriate and culturally sensitive mechanisms to enable participants, researchers or others involved in or affected by a research project to report safeguarding concerns which may arise as a result of their involvement. The University's *Policy on Safeguarding in Research Projects (DRAFT)*, provides details of a researcher's responsibilities in this area.

9. Be as open and transparent as possible

It is important to consider how research can be carried out in an open and transparent way. For example this may include ensuring that the outcomes of research are fed back to the participants/communities involved in an appropriate and accessible way, ensuring that contributors to the research are acknowledged/credited appropriately, and that wherever possible data is shared for the benefit of the wider research community (with appropriate data protection mechanisms and consents).

10. Aim to create a legacy

Researchers should consider the long term legacy that results from their research, and in particular the 'memory' of being researched that they leave behind. Researchers should also aspire to improve future research by sharing experiences good and bad (e.g. by contributing to TUoS' knowledge bank on international research ethics).

Further sources of guidance

Internal:

Sheffield Institute for International Development (SIID)'s research ethics resources, including short video interviews of researchers discussing a range of ethical challenges: <http://siid.group.shef.ac.uk/research/research-ethics/>

International Research Collaborations leaflet:

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.761720!/file/IRCBrochure.pdf

Good Research & Innovation Practices policy:

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf

External:

Ethical standards for ICTD/ICT4D research: <https://ictdethics.wordpress.com/minimum-ethical-standards-in-ictd-ict4d-research-a-co-produced-document/>

ESRC ethics resources: <https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/frequently-raised-topics/>

