

Research Ethics Frequently Asked Questions

July 2022

Regent College London is committed to maintaining high ethical standards in research undertaken by staff and students. These standards, and the principles which underpin them, have been set out in the **College's Code of Practice for Ethical Research Involving Human Participants**.

This document is provided as a supplement to the Code of Practice to reflect the variety of issues raised by researchers working in very different contexts, with very different methodologies and for very different ends and purposes. It is intended to provide a practical guide for researchers and to stimulate continuing discussion and debate as to what constitutes 'good practice' in research involving human participants. The key principles identified in the College's Code of Practice provide the main structure, and, as far as possible, questions are listed under the relevant principle.

If you would like to add further questions and/or further discussion of good practice, please send them to the College Ethics Panel.

1. Introduction

Question: Do I need to get ethics approval to do this project?

The College's Code of Practice, and the procedures for ethics review, refer to research involving human participants. But not all data collection is 'research' in the sense used in these documents. For example, course evaluations, feedback from clients on professional practice, audit/reviews of professional or academic practice and training in methods of data collection are not considered 'research' and do not need to be submitted for ethics review. (Such work should, nonetheless, be conducted in an ethically appropriate manner, particularly with regard to informing participants about the purpose of the exercise and how the data will be used, and in maintaining confidentiality.) *Ethics review is required for all work that will be made public* - for example, undergraduate dissertations, theses for higher degrees, externally funded research and 'unfunded' research (including undergraduate and postgraduate research) which produces reports or other publications.

2. No research should cause harm and preferably it should benefit participants.

Question: This research is too small in scale to be of benefit to the participants, the scientific community or society. Does this mean it is unethical?

Much research carried out by undergraduates is done with the primary aim of furthering the student's education. If this is made clear to the participants before they agree to take part in the study, this is likely to be ethically acceptable.

Question: In-depth interviews (or life histories) can raise issues which participants find distressing to talk about. Does this mean I can't use in-depth interviews (or life histories) to do my study?

The possibility that your participants could become upset in the course of your interviews does not mean you cannot interview them. What you will need to do, however, is make sure you have the knowledge and skills to help someone if they become distressed. This may include both listening skills and written information on services that are available locally to provide longer-term support for individuals. In your application for ethics approval, set out your plans for what you will do if a participant becomes upset.

3. Potential participants normally have the right to receive clearly communicated information from the researcher in advance.

Question: This student is proposing to tape-record lectures as part of his dissertation on teaching styles. Does he need to get consent from the lecturers first?

The answer to this depends on whether the lecture can be regarded a public activity in a public place. If it can, then permission is not needed, though it would be courteous of the student to inform the lecturer of what he or she was doing.

Question: I would like to do a participant observation study of skateboarders in the skateboard park. Do I need to give all of them an information sheet?

So long as you are observing other skateboarders in a public place like a skateboard park, you do not need to provide an information sheet or obtain informed consent. If you would like to talk to individual skateboarders to obtain specific information from them, then you will need to provide an appropriate information sheet and gain their consent to take part in the study. Similarly, if you joined a skateboarding club and wanted to observe behaviour at a team meeting, then consent - before or after the observation took place - would also be needed. If you think this would compromise your research, then make a case in your application for ethics approval and it will be considered.

4. Participants should be free from coercion of any kind and should not be pressured to participate in a study.

Question: Why can't I offer volunteers a payment (or a ticket for a prize draw) for taking part in my study? People are so busy these days that you can't get them to take part unless you offer them a reward. I am getting a degree (or a paper or paid) for doing the study, why should I expect them to take part without getting something out of it themselves?

This is a very difficult ethical question and a balance needs to be found between 'exploiting' participants by asking them to give their time for no benefit to themselves and 'persuading' them to accept costs or risks they would not otherwise agree to by offering money or other rewards. Whether a reward is seen as an '(inappropriate) inducement' will depend on the nature and extent of the risks involved in the research: where the risks are minimal and/or easily managed, a reward (or compensation for effort) is more acceptable. If you would like to offer a reward (or compensation for effort), please make a case for it in your application for ethics approval.

Question: I would like to do my dissertation on attitudes to New Labour amongst managers and workers. My father owns a small printing company and has offered to let me interview his staff. Does this raise any ethical issues?

This study raises the question of whether potential participants will feel pressured into taking part in the study because of their employment by the student's father. In the application for ethics approval, the student would need to set out the steps he or she would take to ensure that this did not happen. For example, someone else could send out recruitment letters to a random and anonymous sample of managers and workers and those who did not want to take part would not have to identify themselves by replying.

5. Participants in a research study have the right to give their informed consent before participating.

Question: Do I need to ask my participants to sign a consent form? Some people are put off if you ask them to sign anything. (It seems inappropriate/heavy-handed for my topic.)

It is always desirable to obtain formal, written consent from participants. In some circumstances, for example, when you recruit participants through the NHS or Social Services, it is always necessary. It is also important to obtain formal, written consent when carrying out research on sensitive topics (e.g. on bereavement, use of illegal drugs or domestic violence) or research which involves taking risks which would not be taken in the ordinary course of everyday life (e.g. randomised control trials, exercise physiology or pollution monitoring). In other circumstances, verbal consent should be obtained and recorded in an appropriate manner (e.g. on tape or in field notes).

6. Where third parties are affected by the research, informal consent should be obtained.

Question: My child is in a day nursery and I want to do a study observing the way the staff members there treat boys and girls differently. Do I need to tell anyone about this or can I just go ahead and do it?

In this sort of study, you will need permission from both the person in charge of the nursery and the parents of the children you wish to observe. The person in charge of the nursery has a duty of care for the children and will need to be convinced that what you are doing is for a worthwhile purpose and that it does not entail any risks to the children.

Question: I would like to send a questionnaire on the abolition of middle schools in Lancashire to all the teachers in the three local primary schools. I know people who work at all the schools - can I just ask them to distribute my questionnaire for me?

It is very useful having local contacts in each school who can distribute questionnaires for you. However, if they are going to use the staff pigeonholes or internal post in the school, it would be good practice to get permission from the Head Teacher first. Is this an ethical issue? Probably not, if it is an anonymous questionnaire to teachers (rather than students) who can decide whether or not to return it.

7. The assent of vulnerable participants or their representatives' consent should be actively sought by researchers.

Question: The school has agreed that we can give these questionnaires on alcohol and drug use to their year 7s. Do I need to get permission from their parents as well?

Although the teacher has given his or her consent to the study, you will still need to explain the study to the children and gain their consent (or assent) to take part. You should also

check with the school to see what their policy is regarding gaining consent from parents, and follow their procedures. As the study is on a sensitive topic, it is particularly important that all those involved - children, parents and teachers - are properly informed about the study and given the option not to participate, or not to have their child asked to participate.

8. Honesty should be central to the relationship between researcher, participant and institutional representatives.

Question: I have recently joined a women's football team. Everyone knows I'm a sociology student at the College but I don't want to tell them that I'm doing my dissertation on women's construction of gender in a traditionally male activity (i.e. the women's football team). Is this ethically acceptable?

There are some circumstances in which 'deceiving' your research participants is essential to the research. Even in these circumstances, however, a good case has to be made that the value of the research outweighs contravening the principle of gaining informed consent in advance, and some effort needs to be made to gain it in retrospect. What are your reasons for not wanting to tell the football team that you would like to look at the construction of gender amongst the team? Would it make it impossible for you to do your research if the team knew what you were doing? Would they want to change - or be able to change - the way gender was constructed in the group? This seems unlikely but if you think it is important to keep your research participants in the dark, then make a case for it in your application for research ethics approval.

Acknowledgement

This Research Ethics FAQ has been adapted from Regent College's partner, the University of Bolton:
<https://www.bolton.ac.uk/assets/Uploads/FAQ-Jun-2018.pdf>