



# **Research Ethics Guidance**

**Social Research Association**

**2021**

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# INTRODUCTION

We've written this guidance for you to draw on when you face an ethical issue or dilemma in social research. It is intended as a basis for reflection and discussion.

Like previous Social Research Association (SRA) guidance on research ethics, it does not offer rigid rules, but illustrates ethical practices to which experienced and respected social researchers generally adhere. Our aim is to encourage you to reflect carefully at all stages of the research process.

While the guidance aims to be comprehensive, it does not claim to provide an answer to every ethical dilemma you may face. While it's important to identify and resolve ethical issues and concerns before research gets underway, it's not always possible to anticipate these.

The guidance is neither exhaustive nor definitive. Rather, we provide clarity about common ethical issues that researchers face, and highlight the importance of reflexivity – that is, checking that your behaviour accords with ethical standards.

The guidance reflects ethical norms, policy and law at the time of writing. The SRA will review it as necessary.

## **Development of the guidance**

We published our first ethical guidelines in the 1980s, and an updated guide in 2003 that has been widely used and is referenced in this guidance.

## **Acknowledgements**

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This guidance is solely the responsibility of the SRA.

## **Disclaimer**

This is not a legal document. While it notes some instances when UK law may affect research (such as data protection legislation) it does not offer legal advice.

# SUMMARY

The guidance is in five main sections, with references and further reading in section 6:

## Informed consent (section 1)

The meaning of informed consent is that information can be collected from or about people only if they have understood the purpose of the research and what their participation entails, and have freely agreed to participate in it.

Informed consent is generally taken to mean that:

- Participation is voluntary and people are not put under pressure to take part
- Prospective participants are given a brief description of the study and of what participation entails, and the researcher can be reasonably confident that participants understand this

Consent is best viewed as a continuous process rather than as a discrete and irreversible decision: participants need to be aware that they can withdraw at any point, for any or no reason.

Although the principle can be straightforwardly stated, ensuring that individuals are both informed and genuinely consenting requires considerable care and attention to detail.

Consent plans and processes are often a major focus of ethics review panels or committees.

## Confidentiality and anonymity (section 2)

Researchers have a responsibility to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, at all stages of the research process, and – as far as possible – to address and resolve any concerns before the research gets under way.

The principle of confidentiality is concerned with limiting access to personal data – defined in the Data Protection Act 2018 as data that identifies a living person or that could identify them in combination with other data. In the context of research, it means that researchers do not share information gained from research participants that may disclose their identities to any unauthorised parties.

Closely related, but distinct, is the principle of anonymity. This means concealing the identities of participants when their data is shared beyond the immediate research team, by removing the name (and/or other identifying information) from a research participant's data.

There are a few specific circumstances when confidentiality and anonymity may be limited and conditional, and when researchers have a duty of care to report possible harm/danger to participant or to others to the relevant authorities.

### Avoiding harm (section 3)

While it is not easy to define 'harm' in the context of social research, there are two key considerations. First, probability – how likely is harm to occur? Second, severity – how serious might it be?

Researchers need to consider the potential for causing harm, and how to avoid it, against the beneficial effects of social research.

Organisations may wish to develop a safeguarding policy to describe how they will avoid causing harm to participants.<sup>1</sup>

The potential for harm can be emotional, physical and financial. While in some situations there is clear guidance and a universal understanding about how to avoid harm, in others the circumstances are less clear cut, and researchers need to make subjective judgements about acceptable risks.

In part, any understanding about 'avoiding harm' depends on different viewpoints. The guidance considers potential harm to:

- Participants
- Researched groups and groups directly interacting with researched groups
- Researchers

The researcher has an ethical responsibility to consider these potentially conflicting perspectives, and to make a balanced and reasoned judgement about what are acceptable risks for everyone involved.

The boundaries of social research continue to expand, for example with the use of social and digital media. New sources of harm may emerge, but with additional mitigations and opportunities.

### Questionable research practices (section 4)

This section considers fabrication, falsification, plagiarism and other questionable practices.

The scope of questionable research practices is wide and nebulous. Depending on the circumstances, there is a continuum between scientific fraud, bias/inaccuracy and simple carelessness or ignorance. However, research professionals have a responsibility to minimise errors by acquiring a good understanding of methods and topics, and by taking a careful approach. So, we consider an additional category of questionable research practice: 'unacknowledged methodological limitations'.

The negative impact of questionable practices can be considerable. At the least, they may waste resources; at worst, they damage the credibility of the profession, and may harm

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<sup>1</sup> See for example the ONS safeguarding policy:  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/contactus/ourresponsibilitytothepublic>

people relying on the findings. Researchers, therefore, have a responsibility to ensure high standards of integrity throughout the research cycle.

### **Ethical foundations (section 5)**

Ethical guidelines require a foundation if they are to command general assent. Rather than basing this guidance on one or other detailed ethical theory (which would inevitably be contested), it is based on what social researchers actually do: on the practices of social researchers who take ethics seriously. In taking this approach (which the SRA has done over many years), the primary aim is to inform rather than prescribe. Rather than impose rigid rules to which social researchers everywhere must adhere, the guidance documents widely held principles of research, and identifies the factors which obstruct their implementation. Sometimes, the operation of one principle impedes the operation of another, and choices need to be made. The guidance does not offer priority lists for making these choices, but a framework within which the conscientious social researcher can, for the most part, work comfortably.

This section briefly discusses a component of social research which many social researchers regard as essential. Broadly speaking, social research is undertaken to provide benefit, whether the intrinsic benefit of widening knowledge or the instrumental benefit of being practically beneficial. If such benefits are to accrue, social research must deliver, and be seen to deliver, valid findings. As such, research must be conducted to high methodological standards and open to expert scrutiny.

# 1 INFORMED CONSENT

## 1.1 Consent in the Data Protection Act 2018

This section aims to enable researchers to behave ethically towards the people they ask to take part in research.

Note that the term 'consent' also has a separate, specific meaning in research, arising from the Data Protection Act 2018, which codifies into UK law the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). For processing personal data to be lawful, one of these must apply:

- The individual has consented to the processing. Consent as a processing condition is conceptually different from legal/ethical consent. Research that depends upon a different processing condition should still act ethically towards participants
- The processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest or in the exercise of official authority of the controller
- The processing is necessary for the performance of a contract to which an individual is party
- The processing is necessary for compliance with a legal obligation (to which the data controller is subject)
- The processing is necessary to protect the vital interests of an individual or another person

For more about this, see guidance from the Information Commissioner's Office<sup>2</sup> and the MRS-SRA guidance.<sup>3</sup>

## 1.2 Information to underpin the consent process

Consent can be counted as informed when potential participants are supplied with enough information for you to assume that they understand what participation entails:

- Who is conducting the research
- Who is funding it
- Its purpose
- Who will use the data and for what
- What participation will entail for them (for example, a 45-minute in-depth interview on their health; completing a short questionnaire; being recorded or filmed)
- Who will have access to their personal data
- What risks to them (if any) could be reasonably seen as arising from participation
- Anything else which could be important for helping them decide about participation

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/consent/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.the-sra.org.uk/SRA/Resources/Good-practice/SRA/Resources/Good-Practice.aspx>

### 1.2.1 *Level of detail*

Informing participants involves more than simply presenting information verbally or in writing, without regard to whether participants can comprehend and process it. This means:

- Making all reasonable efforts to ensure that you present information in an accessible way that matches individuals' needs. Often this means giving key points in summary and/or giving the information relevant to each element of the study when you are seeking consent
- Avoiding legal or technical jargon
- Assessing how much information to provide. If you give too much written information people won't read it thoroughly. On the other hand, a few people might want more rather than less. So, if they want this, provide it, for example by weblinks
- Thinking about the communication needs of different participants. Ask yourself whether your information would be understood by people with low literacy or poor English language skills, or by people with a learning disability or other cognitive impairment. You may need to take advice from other specialists, and adapt materials or communication methods accordingly

## 1.3 **Methods for presenting information when seeking consent**

- When possible, provide written information in advance. Written information is generally all that is required in simple paper-based and online surveys when there is no person-to-person contact with respondents
- In addition to written information, provide verbal explanations when:
  - The recruitment or fieldwork involves direct contact by an interviewer
  - It's possible that a written explanation may not be fully understood
  - The topic is sensitive or likely to generate concern for the participant
  - The methods are especially involved or intrusive

This is often the case with face-to-face and telephone interview studies, focus groups, case studies, longitudinal research, and in research with children, young people or vulnerable groups.

All research fieldworkers who have direct contact with potential participants should be briefed about how to explain the research and what is expected from participation.

A short video or sound recording, which can be accessed at any time (for example on a computer, smartphone or similar), may be helpful for people who have difficulty with written information or remembering details, or when the research is protracted.

## 1.4 **What to cover in consent requests**

Should you seek a single general consent for participating in the overall study, or request a new consent each time for different aspects of the study?

We recommend that you divide the research process into components on the basis of their likely participant impact, and then seek consent separately for any component that is not covered by a generic request.

Using survey research as an example, established good practice is to seek consent for (i) answering the survey questions, and also to ask for additional consent for:

- (ii) any potentially intrusive data collection activities such as physical measurements (for example blood pressure or weight, or especially sensitive questions)
- (iii) data linkage to other datasets
- (iv) any envisaged future data collection exercises such as repeat interviews
- (v) any sharing of identifying details with third parties not already covered by the general consent (such as agreeing to be contacted in the future by a different survey organisation)

When conducting qualitative research, it is good practice to seek consent for the conversation to be recorded (and the method used), as well as for who will have access to any personal data and for how long it will be retained.

People may give consent to some aspects of the research (for example, some topics, questions or procedures) but not to others, and, of course, can change their minds about taking part.

## **1.5 The process of obtaining consent**

### **1.5.1 *Imbalances of power in research relationships***

Researchers need to be alert to the possibility that a potential respondent may think that they are obliged or required to take part. This can occur when an individual is in a vulnerable situation. For example:

- In a research project taking place in prison, a prisoner is invited to be interviewed by someone in authority. This may be seen as a requirement, and that there could be repercussions if they decline
- An elderly person is persuaded by their adult son or daughter to participate in research that they don't understand, or don't agree with

Many more scenarios can be envisaged with vulnerable children and adults. A research interviewer may themselves be perceived as having authority or an official role, for instance if they are working on behalf of a government department or local authority. The researcher needs to identify such power imbalances, and counterbalance their effects by ensuring that it's clear to all parties that participation is entirely voluntary.

Power relationships exist throughout the research process: for example, a researcher may feel under pressure from senior staff or project funders to recruit participants, especially if a study is running late or is failing to meet response targets. There is an obligation on those in

a position of power over the researcher to be aware of this imbalance and to not be the cause of researchers and interviewers behaving unethically.

Research fieldwork depends on the ability of a researcher or interviewer to encourage people to take part. It is legitimate to explain the benefits of participation, whether these apply to the individual, to a local area, or to society in general. But it is also crucial (as noted elsewhere) to explain what participation entails for people's time and effort.

### **1.5.2 Incentives and consent**

In qualitative research studies especially, paying participants is standard practice. Incentives are increasingly also offered to survey participants, especially when the questionnaire is lengthy or complex, or they may be asked for a follow-up interview.

Incentives are usually provided as vouchers for high street shops, rather than cash. This is safer for fieldworkers, administratively convenient, and avoids the risk of any perception that research may be funding harmful activities.

One justification for using incentives is that it gives participants a modest benefit in appreciation of their time and effort. The incentive is often described as a 'token of thanks' rather than any attempt to pay a notional hourly rate.

A second justification is that incentives may improve the accuracy of a study's findings by encouraging respondent groups that are typically under-represented to take part, such as young people, the self-employed and shift workers.

It is sometimes suggested that incentives may exercise undue influence, inducement or even coercion, thus overriding the principle of freely-given consent. In practice, however, it would be very difficult to discover if this was so.

- When incentives are used, remind participants before and during the study that they are not obliged to answer questions or take part in activities if they prefer not to (this is especially important when medical procedures are included)

### **1.5.3 Verbal or written?**

- For much social research, verbal consent is sufficient. However, under some circumstances, you may wish to consider asking participants to read and sign a consent form, for example:
  - When fieldwork is conducted by several different agencies or staff, in order to ensure uniformity of practice
  - In longitudinal and other protracted studies with multiple encounters with researchers, to be clear about who has consented to what
  - In research that has a higher than usual risk of legal or ethical challenge, typically when there is a relatively high risk of discomfort associated with participation (for example, if you are probing especially sensitive issues, or if there are medical procedures)

- If you are using consent as the legal basis for processing personal data under the Data Protection Act 2018, you are required to keep records to demonstrate what the individual has consented to, including what they were told, and when and how they consented

Using a sound recorder or video camera is an alternative method for recording consent. This may be useful if literacy is an issue, although it may be daunting for participants, and there are further data protection issues.

#### **1.5.4 What to cover in consent forms**

Written consent usually consists of a printed checklist that participants read, tick and sign. Typically, the checklist spells out the discrete aspects of the consent process. One example is shown below, from a qualitative study:

- ✓ I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the opportunity to think about the information and ask questions
- ✓ I confirm that my involvement in this study is voluntary and that I am free to leave the study at any time, without giving any reason (and this won't affect any services I may be receiving)
- ✓ I understand that any information or quotes (exact words) used from this study will be completely anonymous and that I will not be able to be identified
- ✓ I give permission for our discussion to be audio-recorded
- ✓ I agree to take part in this study

#### **1.5.5 Potential risks of seeking signed or recorded consent**

Asking people to sign, or electronically record consent, may mean they find it harder to withdraw from the research once it is underway.

Giving written consent makes people feel less able to withdraw from the study or to choose not to answer specific questions. The ongoing and process side of consent is discussed below: participants need to be reminded throughout the process that taking part is voluntary, no matter what they have signed.

### **1.6 Timing – when to seek consent**

- Seek consent before any research activities take place. For studies that are particularly demanding of participant time or what they have to do (such as physical examinations, blood samples, further visits), give people generous notice
- The more you ask of participants, the more time you need to give to them to consider your request
- Provide support such as explanatory materials, or access to a helpline. This may be a break for reflection after information has been given, or a separation of study information from consent collection, for example over days. Allowing people to

consult with their significant others can be useful, as long as that doesn't introduce its own issues of coercion

- Be aware that, if you ask too far in advance, people may need reminding by the time you want to start fieldwork, and/or their circumstances may have changed

## 1.7 Continuous nature of consent

- Never make participants feel that withdrawing from the research is a problem
- Think of consent as a continuous process rather than a one-off event
- Remain sensitive to the possibility that participants may change their minds and wish to withdraw from the study or from parts of it at any time, regardless of the consent they originally gave
- If data collection involves personal contact, such as interviews and focus groups, be alert to non-verbal cues of discomfort, especially when covering sensitive or personal topics and when working with vulnerable, or less confident or less articulate people
- If such cues are evident, check if the participant is happy to continue, by asking either if they would prefer to skip the present line of questioning, or to take a break. In a group setting you could suggest a comfort break and check privately with the individual, to avoid embarrassment
- Similarly, in an interview, a participant may 'overshare' personal experiences, and it is worth checking at the end of the interview if they are comfortable with what they have discussed being used in a research study

## 1.8 Secondary use of personal data

- Explain to participants how their personal data will be used, and gain consent for each of these activities

The Data Protection Act 2018 sets out legal responsibilities: personal data must be collected for clearly-defined purposes and not further processed for additional purposes not in keeping with what participants were originally told. However, as noted above, personal data being processed for research purposes that are scientific, statistical, historical or archival can, in principle, use legal exemptions from this requirement. There is good information about this on the website of the Information Commissioner's Office (see section 6).

Researchers typically seek to de-personalise data (for example, for analysis, or sharing) by removing items such as name, address and other identifying data. However, the Information Commissioner's Office advises that data, for which such identifiers have been removed or replaced (known as pseudonymised data), is still considered to be personal data if it is possible to reconstruct the original data, for example by matching using a linking variable such as a serial number. Data is considered anonymised only if identifiers are removed *and* a matching process is not possible.

## 1.9 Special consent issues

### 1.9.1 Capacity to consent

To give informed consent a person has to (i) understand what their participation in the research will entail and (ii) give their free, un-coerced, agreement to take part. Some people may lack the full mental capacity either to understand what they are being asked to do, or to understand that they have a real choice about whether or not to take part.

Assume that everyone (including children and young people) has the capacity to consent or not, unless their incapacity is established. There are two main situations under which researchers generally give special consideration to a person's capacity to consent:

- When researching individuals who are diagnosed as lacking some mental capacity through illness or disability
- When researching children and young people under 16

#### *Capacity of children and young people under 16*

Key points to consider:

- The age of consent for a child may differ by region/country, and also vary depending on the sensitivity of topics covered. It's vital to consult with relevant charities/stakeholders on this
- While there is no legal requirement to obtain consent from a parent or guardian of a child/young person under 16 to take part in research, for most studies this is good practice – but see below for further discussion
- Consent to participate must be sought from the individual child/young person – see below for further discussion
- Information about the research needs to be given in a form that is accessible to children/young people of different ages and according to cognitive abilities, communication skills and literacy
- Some children/young people may need support with structuring their decision-making (which is not the same as making the decision for them)

For projects researching children/young people, researchers are increasingly including them at the design stage as active participants. This can help the project to be relevant to this group, and may also help when seeking ethical approval.

#### **Parental consent issues**

There is no legal requirement to obtain consent from a parent or responsible adult for a child under 16 to take part in research but, in general, this is good practice in social research. Some considerations:

- Could asking for parental consent harm the child/young person (for example, in research with children/young people who may have been abused by a family member)?
- Is parental consent relevant (for example, a survey questionnaire for children/young people age 15 on some innocuous topic)?

Researchers need to take advice on these points.

Note that members of the Market Research Society must ensure that permission of a responsible adult is obtained and verified before a child participates in its professional activities. The approval of the MRS Market Research Standards Board may be sought to waive this requirement at: [codeline@mrs.org.uk](mailto:codeline@mrs.org.uk).

### Child consent issues

Social researchers seeking to determine if a child/young person is capable of making informed consent may refer to guidelines originally developed from medical health settings: the **Gillick competence** and **Fraser guidelines** arose from a legal case in the 1980s about whether doctors can give contraceptive advice to under-16s. While providing some structure to decision-making, these rely on the judgement of professionals in specific circumstances. The [NSPCC website](#) has further information.

#### *Capacity of individuals who have a diagnosed cognitive impairment*

The Mental Capacity Act 2005 provides the legal framework for the conduct of research with adults who lack mental capacity. This legislation covers England and Wales only, and there are different requirements in other countries, including Scotland and Northern Ireland.<sup>4</sup> The key provisions of the Act are outlined below. Many of these are good ethical practice, even if not mandated by law.

The Act requires that, to carry out intrusive research with people who lack the capacity to consent to the research, there must be good reasons for doing so. The Act states that:

1. The research must be connected with an impairing condition affecting the participant or its treatment
2. Research of equal effectiveness could not be carried out if confined to participants with capacity
3. The research must either: (a) have the potential to benefit the participant, or (b) provide knowledge of the causes of, or treatment or care of others with, the same or a similar condition, without imposing a disproportionate burden

The Act states that a person is unable to make a decision (that is, is unable to consent) if they cannot:

- Understand the information relevant to the decision
- Retain the information

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<sup>4</sup> Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000; Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

- Use or weigh the information
- Communicate their decision (by any means)

When researching people who might lack capacity, it is important to assume a participant does have mental capacity unless established otherwise.

- Take care to explain the research and what participation entails in language that suits the individual's capacity, and make use of any support or help that they use in everyday life to help facilitate this
- Wherever possible, allow and enable participants to make their own decisions
- Note that, for some people, capacity may fluctuate over time

If someone does not have the capacity to consent, the Act lays out an approach that can be taken to include them in the research. Under the Act, no-one gives consent on behalf of a person lacking capacity. Instead, the researcher is required to seek advice from a consultee on what the wishes and feelings of the person might be, and whether or not they would want to take part. The consultee gives advice, not consent in law. This is an important step, to help ensure research is representative of marginalised groups.

The Act also makes it clear that if the participant appears to object to the research at any time, they need to be withdrawn from the research.

- Be alert to verbal or non-verbal cues of unease or discomfort as the research progresses, and adapt, take a break or terminate the research accordingly

## 1.10 Case study: informed consent

### *The study*

A government department wanted to understand people's experiences of applying to take part in a complex new support programme available to members of the public with a specific set of needs. Programme assessors had been recruited across the UK to work in assessment centres, and were trained to ensure that programme applicants uniformly received the same assessment process. The department wished to find out whether applicants were being treated fairly and that the correct rules were being applied, to see if additional training was needed.

A research agency was recruited to test the application process by sending researchers to assessment centres to act the part of a range of applicants. To ensure an unbiased outcome, their identities as researchers were not revealed to assessors during or after assessment.

### *Ethical issues*

The assessors were unaware that they were taking part in research to evaluate the application process. Therefore, informed consent was not sought. The ethical issue is to consider the potential harm done to the assessors, against the potential benefits of the study.

To reduce the risk of individuals being reprimanded for their work, the study was designed so that the findings did not reveal assessors' identities or locations. The potential for harm is, therefore, in the deception that took place by not asking assessors for consent to participate in the research. The department and their independent advisers judged that the risk of harm was relatively minor, compared to the potential benefits of the study for applicants (and for the prudent use of public money to fund the programme), in helping to improve the accuracy of assessments. This was explained to the team of researchers undertaking data collection.

### ***Lessons learned***

- Informed consent is not an absolute ethical requirement for all research
- However, the impact of its absence must be carefully assessed and justified against ethical criteria such as benefits and harms: can this absence be justified by a greater public benefit?
- The fact that a research project is not possible with informed consent does not, by itself, justify withholding consent
- The feelings of researchers asked to engage in deception (even on a minor level) must be considered
- Arrange for some independent assurance to make sure the study is well considered

## 2 CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

### 2.1 What kinds of information?

Protecting the data provided by participants often requires researchers to remove personal details, such as name, date of birth and address, and official identifiers such as National Insurance and NHS numbers. In addition, a wide range of other types of information could indirectly disclose identity, such as biological or genetic data, employer/school or profession, job title, or a unique combination of attributes.

- Consider the confidentiality and anonymity of communities and organisations which are the subject of, or may be affected by, your research. Information about location, size, sector or function could identify them
- Respect the confidentiality of privileged information provided by funders/commissioners. For example, if a charity has commissioned an evaluation of a service and allows you access to its database of service users, you have an ethical responsibility to maintain the confidentiality of this or any other third-party information

### 2.2 Where does responsibility lie?

All individuals involved in the research process and/or who have access to data have a responsibility for maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of participants/potential participants. This includes funding agencies, project managers, sub-contractors and others such as gatekeepers and administrators.

- Take care to ensure that all third parties (for example external agencies transcribing research interviews) understand how the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants will be protected and their own roles and responsibilities in this process. This needs to be built into commissioning and governance arrangements
- Outline funder and researcher responsibilities in contracts/service-level agreements, including those with sub-contractors, and include protocols for data-sharing if applicable

### 2.3 Sampling and recruitment

- When recruiting research participants, take all reasonable steps to ensure that you maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of individuals. This applies to research participants and organisations, and to others who may be considered as potential participants but who do not go on to take part
- When third parties (such as parents/carers, proxies, translators) are involved in research recruitment, you need to take additional steps to ensure that they

understand the importance of maintaining confidentiality for those approached, and their role in this process

- Make it clear that research participants are not obliged to share information they prefer to keep private and, more generally, that they can decline to take part or withdraw from the research at any point
- It is good practice for you to describe, in the written documents you provide as part of informed consent procedures, how you will maintain confidentiality and anonymity, and how you will use, store and share data

## 2.4 Data collection

Aspects of the data-collection process may impinge on participants' confidentiality and anonymity – for example where interviews take place, the method of data collection, whether other people are present (particularly in video or photographs).

- You may need to take steps to ensure that individuals' responses cannot be seen by others when collecting data in a group setting (for example in a survey administered in a classroom)
- Avoid unintentional disclosure – for example, by ensuring data collection takes place where the interaction cannot be overheard
- Ensure that data-collection procedures prevent inadvertent confidentiality breaches. For example, in focus groups agree clear ground rules about confidentiality at the start (using first names only, agreeing that 'what is said in the room stays in the room'); avoid unnecessarily intrusive questions; and remain sensitive to an individual's right not to provide information

## 2.5 Data processing and analysis

Researchers are responsible for keeping the data they gather secure.

- Check that data is kept confidential when in transit from research site to office, or to sub-contractors such as transcribers (by using sealed envelopes, encrypted memory sticks, secure platforms and so on)
- Check all datasets (qualitative and quantitative) to ensure they are non-disclosive. This is particularly important when data is to be made publicly available (for example archiving publicly-funded research through the UK Data Archive Service)

It is good practice to anonymise individual data using anonymous identifiers.

- When doing this, store raw data separately from files linking anonymous identifiers to participant identities
- For qualitative data, such as interviews and focus groups, you may need to replace names and locations with pseudonyms; and only start recording after people have introduced themselves.
- You need written agreements for all individuals and organisations involved in handling and processing data. These agreements should describe the practical

arrangements of how data will be stored and processed. They should be in line with legislative requirements and ethical practice.

The principles of the 2018 Data Protection Act state that processing of data must be fair, lawful and transparent:

1. Personal data must be collected for specified purposes and not further processed in a manner incompatible with those purposes. This does not apply if the further processing is statistical.
2. Personal data must be adequate, relevant and not excessive.
3. Personal data must be accurate and (if necessary) kept up to date.
4. Personal data must be kept in a form that permits identification of individuals for no longer than is necessary for the purposes of the processing. Researchers have an exemption that states personal data may be stored for longer periods when used for statistical purposes only.
5. Personal data must be kept secure.

Now that the UK has left the EU, data transfers between these territories, and from the UK to other non-EU countries, are more complex – see the relevant section of the website of the [Information Commissioner's Office](#).

## 2.6 Reporting and dissemination

When research is disseminated, the confidentiality of participants can be maintained in different ways (such as omitting data and changing key characteristics of participants). However, it is important to maintain the integrity of the data. A key dilemma for researchers is how to convey a detailed, accurate description of a social world without compromising the identities or breaching the confidentiality of those involved, whether research participants or third parties.

There are challenges to maintaining confidentiality in both qualitative and quantitative research. For example:

- In qualitative research, it may be possible to identify quoted individuals by their 'voice' (turns of phrase and so on) even when anonymised
- In case studies, it may be easy to identify stakeholders with specific roles, or in a local area
- In quantitative studies, it may be necessary not to report numbers in very small sub-groups in case individual identities could be inferred. You may need to change the demographic descriptors used for specific research participants in final publications to conceal identity, when a rare characteristic of that person plays a central role in the research (for example, a medical practitioner who is a single specialist of a certain sort in a hospital/local area). Ensure that what's changed does not affect the research conclusions. However, it may be necessary to suppress publication of certain details of the research findings

- Research participants may ask *not* be made anonymous in published reports, so they can publicly own their views. Balance the value of giving participants a voice in the research, against the risks: for example, the participant may expose themselves to harm, or change their mind after publication, or other participants' confidentiality may be compromised by association

## 2.7 Data storage, retention and archiving

Respondent data needs to be stored securely, retained and archived for an agreed amount of time in line with the legislation, and the requirements of the research protocol.

- At all stages, protect confidentiality
- Check the Information Commissioner's Office (see section 6) for information about the Data Protection Act 2018.

## 2.8 Social media research

There are specific issues of confidentiality and anonymity associated with using social media data for research.

Although the Data Protection Act 2018 permits the processing of personal data that has been 'manifestly made public' by the data subject, it does not define or illustrate what 'manifestly made public' means.

Is data gathered from social media public or not? This is likely to vary depending on the platform. For example, it's likely that Twitter posts have been 'manifestly made public', whereas contributors to a restricted chatroom would not be expecting a wider audience.

- Check the terms and conditions of the platform(s) in question about third-party use of data
- Don't assume that site users have done so

There are also concerns about anonymity, particularly if the researcher wishes to quote material verbatim from a social media platform. Even if anonymised, it may be easy to trace such verbatim material back to the original source using a search engine: this could expose individuals to harm.

The UK Government Social Research Service (GSR) has published guidance at:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/524754/Annex to GSR Ethics Guidance - Social Media Research.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/524754/Annex_to_GSR_Ethics_Guidance_-_Social_Media_Research.pdf)

As an emerging area, there is no consensus as to what online material can and cannot be treated as publicly available for researchers to use.

- Be cautious, particularly if data is of a sensitive nature

## 2.9 Limitations of confidentiality

In some situations, researchers need to consider confidentiality against the welfare and safety of the research participants or others:

1. Legal requirements: UK legislation requires knowledge of planned terrorist activity, and money laundering, to be reported to the police
2. Disclosure of harm: for example, if a respondent reveals that they intend to harm themselves or others

It is not possible to regulate for every possible situation. But many qualitative studies take the precaution of explaining to respondents, in advance, that if such information is revealed then it will be disclosed to the authorities.

There may be situations when a more general risk of serious harm or damage is revealed (such as the threat of a major cyber-attack or of environmental damage). Researchers need to balance confidentiality against their wider social responsibilities.

- When conducting research with vulnerable adults (such as those with learning disabilities or reduced capacity) or with children/young people, anticipate these sorts of issues
- Find out about, and follow, adult safeguarding or child protection protocols
- Do this in advance so you know about your responsibilities and what you should do if you receive a disclosure. In exceptional circumstances (see 1 and 2 above) where you must disclose information to the authorities, inform the participant in advance (unless doing so would increase risk of harm). Report only the minimum amount of information/data to meet legal or safeguarding responsibilities. Keep other data confidential

## 2.10 Case studies: confidentiality and anonymity

### Case study 1

#### *The study*

A researcher is conducting an organisational study of a community group in London. Before beginning the research, she agreed with the head of the organisation that, in order to maintain the confidentiality of the people working with the group, she would use pseudonyms for all research respondents and the group itself in any field notes and published materials. However, when she begins to write up the findings of the research, she thinks these would be significantly enriched if she quoted from documents on the group's website.

### *Ethical issues*

Quoting directly from documents on the group's website could reveal the identity of the group and its members. This could breach the researcher's commitment to maintain the anonymity of respondents. However, this would be at the expense of omitting important context which would inform the research findings.

The researcher consulted colleagues about how best to resolve this. She identified the following options:

- Seek retrospective consent from the participants
- Develop composite case illustrations
- Consider alternative means of anonymisation, such as using the name of the organisation and anonymising individuals. This would mean seeking consent from participants with the risk that people familiar with that area of work could identify the individuals involved
- Rather than publish quotes from the organisation's materials, she could summarise or paraphrase this

The researcher decided to summarise the content of the documents rather than quote from them directly. Respondents felt strongly that their identity should be protected, so she prioritised this.

### *Lessons learned*

If possible, researchers should anticipate the sources they can use and agree with respondents and colleagues in advance if there are confidentiality or other ethical issues.

## **Case study 2**

### *The study*

It has been agreed that participants in a qualitative study on sexual promiscuity will receive the draft report to check that they are happy with how the researchers have anonymised their data. One participant responds by saying that he doesn't want his verbatim quotations to be anonymised. He also says that if the researcher doesn't agree, he will withdraw from the study altogether, which will mean removing all his data from the analysis and report. The researcher is concerned that if this individual is identified in the report, third parties such as his partner and children may be exposed to embarrassment and/or more serious harm, now or in the future.

### *Ethical issues*

The researcher meets the participant in order to understand his rationale and to see if they can agree a solution. When they meet, the researcher reminds the participant that he had signed a written agreement (including that all data would be anonymised). The researcher explains that there could be consequences for the participant's family members if his identity were divulged. The research participant still wants to be identified in the research.

So, the researcher proposes that the report states that 'some names have been changed' and uses first names only. The participant accepts this.

### *Lessons learned*

Sometimes participants want to be identified, including when the research focuses on issues that are seen as socially taboo.

Researchers need to ensure that participants understand the consequences of being identified (for themselves as well as others), and also consider their wishes.

Participants may change their minds. This may have implications for publication.

## 3 AVOIDING HARM

### 3.1 Potential harm to participants

Researchers should discuss and address potential harm to participants at the design/inception stage, and include the outcome of these discussions in the research proposal/brief.

However, not all risks can be anticipated. So, a vital part of mitigating harm is to be aware of this throughout the research process. It may not be possible to avoid harm entirely, but it is possible to minimise it by being aware of the potential, by careful planning, and by responding promptly in the event of harm.

#### 3.1.1 Physical harm

While physical harm is less likely to occur within social research than clinical/medical research, it is possible. An example is the environment in which the research takes place: does the research site pose any safety risk to participants? Can the participant travel to and from it safely?

Some surveys involve physical checks (such as balance tests, activity tests) or collecting biological samples or health markers. These require a risk management policy with procedures for any potential problems.

#### 3.1.2 Emotional distress

Social research can involve participants talking about and reflecting upon sensitive topics. This may cause them emotional distress, embarrassment and/or anxiety.

- Avoid making the emotional stress a focus of the research unless absolutely necessary. For example:
  - Evaluating services for children in care: do not ask the children why they are in care or for the number of placements unless absolutely relevant
  - Interviewing in a Young Offenders Institution: do not ask the young offender the reason for their sentence unless required
  - During an interview, pay attention and respond appropriately to verbal and non-verbal indicators of distress

Some reviews have found that only a minority of participants experience distress when 'reliving' a difficult experience or trauma, and that the benefits of participation in trauma-related research outweigh the risk, with any negative effects dissipating quickly (Legerski and Bunnell, 2010; Brown, Strauss, LaBar et al, 2014).

To minimise the emotional distress of participants, researchers need to plan, according to the nature of the research. This includes ensuring that interaction with a participant does not finish until there is some resolution of the emotional distress. This includes:

- Not rushing participants
- Taking time to listen
- Ensuring that participants feel that their contribution is worthwhile
- If a participant does become upset or distressed:
  - Offering to pause the interview, or to terminate and/or rearrange it
  - Reminding them that their participation is voluntary. The decision about how to proceed should be guided by each participant's preference

The potential for psychological harm in social research is not isolated to research that focuses on sensitive topics. For example, ongoing research with vulnerable participants (such as regular observation of someone with learning difficulties) can result in the participant becoming attached/close to the researcher. At the end of the research process and when withdrawing from the relationship, researchers could provide information about organisations offering advice and support, and how to get a copy of the research report (Iphofen, 2011).

- Be clear about the research aims
- Do not overstate individual benefits in a way that misleads participants about the potential benefits and outcomes

### **3.1.3 Financial harm**

- Consider participants' costs such as travel expenses, time off work or caring/babysitting arrangements, and reimburse them for their outlay or any loss of earnings
- Check that financial incentives for participants don't affect their entitlement to state benefits

## **3.2 Potential harm to wider groups**

Research findings may show a particular group in a negative light. This may cause distress to participants and non-participants of the study. For example, research results may inadvertently fuel pejorative stereotypes about specific groups who are already marginalised, for example, people receiving state benefits. Researchers should not suppress findings but be mindful about how these are reported and avoid judgemental language in reports, blog posts, press releases and so on.

## **3.3 Potential harm to the research team**

There may be a risk that research causes physical harm or emotional distress to researchers. Researchers need to be aware of such risks and what can be done to mitigate them. Lone interviewers may be vulnerable. These issues are covered in detail in the SRA's [Safety for Social Researchers](#).

### **3.3.1 Emotional distress**

Interviewing vulnerable groups on sensitive topics (for example survivors of sexual abuse) may lead to researchers feeling overwhelmed. They may find it difficult to balance empathy and the urge to help against professional neutrality. To minimise this:

- Be self-reflexive
- Be aware of your own emotional responses
- Have systems (either formal or informal) for debriefing
- Seek support if necessary. For example, speak to a line manager, supervisor or counsellor after an interview

### **3.3.2 Physical harm**

Social research may involve visiting unfamiliar environments, with possible risk to personal safety. Examples include interviewing in high-crime areas, people's homes, or in low, medium and high-risk surroundings such as residential facilities for people with forensic histories, or in correctional facilities.

Consider:

- Taking a colleague with you
- Letting someone know where and when you are going and coming back
- Reporting to a local police station that you are interviewing in the area.

See also advice from the Suzy Lamplugh Trust in section 6.

## **3.4 Points to consider**

- Minimise potential risk of harm to participants, the researched groups and groups directly interacting with researched groups, and researchers
- Your two main considerations are: probability – how likely is harm to occur? And severity – how serious might the harm be?
- There is an ethical responsibility to fully consider the range of possible harms, and to avoid or minimise them
- Ensure that the participant is as fully aware as possible of all possible risks from harm (part of informed consent)
- Consider and balance potential benefits with risks to judge what is acceptable
- Be aware of sensitive issues for participants, and be able to signpost support

## 3.5 Case study: avoiding harm

### *The study*

A mixed-methods evaluation undertaken by a mental health charity aims to explore what supports exist in a mental health residential facility for people who are suicidal, and the perceived effectiveness of such supports. Among the semi-structured interview questions for residents, there is one about perceived triggers of suicidal thoughts. Participants may speak about past adverse events and/or their anniversaries, for example death of a loved one, sexual abuse, abusive family member, court cases or forced hospitalisations.

There are protocols to respond to participants if there is harm or emotional distress. The study receives ethics approvals from the NHS Social Care Research Ethics Committee and local authority research governance structures.

### *Ethical issues*

As noted by Kara (2018, p.161), whereas there are guidelines on how to minimise harm to study participants, there are few ethical codes or guidelines that mention researchers' wellbeing.

Interviewers may be upset by participants' accounts of adverse events, and may struggle to maintain professional standards. They may also struggle to remain detached during interviews and afterwards, as participants may come to view them as 'therapist' and seek an ongoing relationship.

### *Solutions*

- Brief interviewers about the issues that might arise during interviews
- Develop protocols to deal with this
- Recruit interviewers with experience of handling difficult or sensitive topics
- Train interviewers on how to deal with distress, in the moment and post-interview, such as deep breathing, meditation, reflexivity on own emotions
- Give interviewers opportunities for de-briefing with peers/research team members either face-to-face or online
- Inform interviewers about sources of support such as counselling or helplines

### *Lessons learned*

- Social researchers need to address the differential impact of distressing accounts on participants and researchers, and how to mitigate this
- When researching sensitive issues such as suicide, researchers need to consider the methodology very carefully
- It is important to speak to the experts in the field at the outset (in this example, Samaritans) in order to fully understand the participant group, the risks and how to mitigate these

## 4 QUESTIONABLE RESEARCH PRACTICES

### 4.1 Fabrication

Fabrication is when researchers intentionally invent research elements. This can occur at any point in the research cycle: data collection, analysis and reporting.

Examples of fabrication include reporting on research that has not taken place, overstating the number of research participants who took part in the research, or completing a questionnaire for someone who did not take part. A subtler form of fabrication is when claims about results are based on part-real and part-invented information: for example, adding fictitious data to a real data set in order to ensure statistical validity, or adding a clinical note into a research record in order to comply with an aspect of the research protocol.

### 4.2 Falsification

Examples of falsification include changing and/or omitting data in order to modify the outcome, misrepresenting results from statistical analysis, or adding false or misleading statements to misrepresent the methods used.

Some writers see falsification as more problematic than fabrication because it is often difficult to identify. Further, inaccurate reporting is not necessarily the result of conscious deception, but can result from unconscious bias. The distinction between falsification and selective reporting is not clear cut. For example, a statistically significant relationship identified after repeated 'data mining' could be presented inaccurately as confirming the original hypothesis of the study, by an analyst unaware that this practice renders the result invalid.

### 4.3 Plagiarism

Plagiarism is when researchers appropriate another person's ideas, processes, results or words without giving credit. As with other questionable research practices there is a continuum of seriousness.

At its worst, plagiarism is 'literal copying', that is, when text is duplicated word for word, without any reference to the original source. However, there are also many, perhaps subtler, forms of plagiarism. These include paraphrasing: re-expressing someone else's ideas without proper acknowledgement and/or reference to the original source.

With the emergence of plagiarism detection software, the practice of 'Rogeting' has emerged as an increasingly common form of plagiarism: the author changes some words in the text to avoid detection ('Rogeting' refers to Roget's Thesaurus).

There is also the (sometimes contested) issue of auto/self-plagiarism. This refers to an author reusing a significant amount of their own work without acknowledging it. One

example is submitting a paper for publication but failing to acknowledge that it has been published elsewhere.

#### **4.4 Unacknowledged methodological limitations**

This comes under a separate heading because it is prevalent and important enough to warrant its own section. Although it shares features with fabrication, falsification and other questionable research practices, it also differs from these as there is usually no intention to deceive.

The use of methods without their limitations being acknowledged is often associated with overclaiming the validity or generalisability of results. In quantitative research, a common example is when researchers make unjustifiable claims about the accuracy of population characteristics on the basis of surveys that use online volunteer panel samples.<sup>5</sup>

In qualitative research, verbatim quotes from participants may be selectively used to support particular conclusions. Quotes may also be presented without giving the reader the background information necessary to make a balanced judgement about their context and meaning. It is good practice to present unique identifiers alongside quotes.

Overclaiming may arise because a researcher is more concerned about drawing conclusions than explaining the limitations of the methods.

Alternatively, failing to recognise limitations can result from methodological ignorance. Ignorance is not a valid defence because professional social researchers are expected to have acquired sufficient skills and knowledge to either:

- Understand the strengths and limitations of the research methods they use or
- Recognise when their skills and knowledge are insufficient, and seek advice from others

Relatedly, researchers may find their research is presented by third parties in a misleading manner (for example in the media) because methodological limitations have not been acknowledged. For this reason, it is good practice for researchers to ask to see third-party presentations of their work in advance.

#### **4.5 Other questionable research practices**

While many other questionable research practices may be seen as less serious than fabrication, falsification and plagiarism, they can have a significant and adverse impact on the overall integrity of research. Gaining ethical approval for a study does not insure against this.

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<sup>5</sup> No convincing theoretical arguments have been made to support claims of the representativeness of online volunteer panels, and a number of high-profile empirical studies have demonstrated that panel-based estimates are frequently in error. See: <https://www.aapor.org/Education-Resources/Reports/Report-on-Online-Panels>

When carrying out research it is not possible to plan for every possible eventuality and there can always be grey areas.

Some examples:

- Collecting additional data solely because the original results are not statistically significant
- Misrepresentation of findings, such as:
  - Failing to report 'negative' findings (such as not publishing results when the findings are unhelpful to the researcher or funder, or failing to prove a hypothesis)
  - Removing outliers from the data with the intention of skewing the findings in a particular direction, eg. to strengthen a conclusion. (Note that removing outliers *per se* is acceptable where their presence makes the findings unrepresentative.)
  - Failing to report all dependent variables or conditions relevant to a finding
  - Rounding of p values (reporting a p value of .045 as .05)
- Deliberately introducing bias, for example using non-neutral question wording to achieve a desired outcome, or failing to declare conflicts of interest
- Journal/book submissions include numerous examples:
  - 'Salami slicing': multiple publications are generated by 'slicing' the data very thinly
  - Guest authors who are named because of their position/seniority, rather than because they met the criteria for authorship
  - 'Gift authors' who are listed as a result of a personal favour or in return for payment
  - 'Ghost authors' who have contributed, but who are not named
- Taking ideas from informal discussion with colleagues and then presenting these in another more formal setting as being one's own unique research ideas
- 'HARKing': 'hypothesising after the results are known' is questionable when a deductive methodology is used, but not for other methodological approaches such as with grounded theory – an inductive approach in which hypothesising or theorising does not occur until after data collection/analysis

## 5 ETHICAL FOUNDATIONS

In writing this guidance, the authors are aware that, by its very nature (prescriptive/proscriptive), it expresses a point of view about what constitute better and worse ways of doing research, and that this requires justification. To count as an *ethical* judgement, a judgement has to be something more than an expression of opinion: it has to be derivable from widely accepted underlying normative precepts.

But *which* underlying normative precepts? Moral philosophy does not appear to provide the answer. No ethical theory commands general assent amongst either philosophers or the population at large, and it is clear that any attempt to base professional guidelines on one or another such theory (for example on a variant of deontological, consequentialist or virtue-based ethical theory) would generate dispute.

The SRA's previous ethical guides argued that a better set of normative precepts is provided by what social researchers actually do in their everyday practice. It is a fact that most social researchers care about doing research that leaves the world in a better rather than a worse state and, by and large, researchers agree about what constitutes ethical and unethical behaviour in research. Indeed, many hold these views strongly. This widespread concern about doing research ethically was crystallised in the Academy for Social Sciences (AcSS) five foundational ethical principles tailored to the specific needs of the social sciences:<sup>6</sup>

1. A free social science, based on a plurality of interests, funding, methods and perspectives, is fundamental to the UK as a democratic society.
2. The privacy, autonomy, diversity and dignity of individuals and communities should be respected.
3. All social science research should be carried out to the highest degree of scientific integrity and employ the most appropriate methods consistent with this.
4. All social science researchers should acknowledge their social responsibilities.
5. All social science should aim to maximise benefit and minimize harm.

Although this guidance is not linked directly to the AcSS principles, it uses the same foundation: the practices of social researchers who take ethics seriously.

Given this, the aim of this guidance is relatively humble. Rather than impose a rigid set of rules to which social researchers everywhere are expected to adhere, the guidance aims to inform in order to enable a social researcher's individual ethical judgements and decisions to be set in the context of the shared values and experiences of fellow professionals. The aim of the guidance remains exactly as in 2003:

'The guidelines therefore seek to document widely held principles of research and to identify the factors which obstruct their implementation. They are framed in the recognition that, on occasions, the operation of one principle will impede the operation of another, that social researchers, in common with other occupational

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<sup>6</sup> [https://acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Ethics-Final-Principles\\_16\\_06\\_2014.pdf](https://acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Ethics-Final-Principles_16_06_2014.pdf)

groups, have competing obligations not all of which can be fulfilled simultaneously. Thus, implicit or explicit choices between principles will sometimes have to be made. The guidelines do not attempt to resolve these choices or to allocate greater priority to one of the principles than to another. Instead, they offer a framework within which the conscientious social researcher should, for the most part, be able to work comfortably. Where departures from the framework of principles are contemplated, they should be the result of deliberation rather than of ignorance.

The guidelines' first intention is thus to be informative and descriptive rather than authoritarian or rigidly prescriptive.'

## 5.1 Creating benefit through trustworthy research

At a general level, social research is undertaken to create benefits, albeit ones that are broadly defined as accruing to society or humanity as a whole ([Academy of Social Sciences](#), principle 1). These benefits of social research can take two forms:

1. *Intrinsic* benefits of increased knowledge. Although these are hard to quantify and cannot be argued for in terms of direct social benefit, it is commonly accepted that knowledge is valuable in itself.
2. Broad *instrumental* (practically useful) benefits of increased knowledge: for example, informing policy-making, providing trusted information to help frame political debate.

Social research, as practised by knowledgeable researchers, necessarily creates the first sort of benefit. Any 'research' practice not setting out to increase knowledge is not true social research. In contrast, instrumental benefits sometimes do and sometimes do not accrue to social research (and therefore this kind of benefit is not definitive of social research in the same way).

If social research is to deliver intrinsic and instrumental benefits it is essential that it produces valid findings, from which derives the principle that **social research should be conducted to high methodological standards**. In practice, if the reader is to assess whether this principle has been met, a secondary principle is also required: **research should be reported fully<sup>7</sup> and accurately**.

Because social research depends on maintaining the confidence of the public, its continued existence in the long-term requires researchers to make efforts to preserve and to promote such confidence, by conducting research to high standards and **being seen to do so**. Any findings that are discovered to be false will undermine public confidence, with long-term corrosive consequences. This reinforces the principle that social researchers should conduct research to high methodological standards and disseminate findings alongside honest and informed quality assessments. This means describing the methods and approaches used, and the potential limitations, inaccuracies and uncertainties of the findings.

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<sup>7</sup> Unless publication would have damaging consequences, for example to the economy or national security.

## 6 REFERENCES, LINKS AND FURTHER READING

All links were checked at the time of publication. To report broken links please email [admin@the-sra.org.uk](mailto:admin@the-sra.org.uk)

### 6.1 Sources of general advice

**Government Social Research: Professional guidance: ethical assurance for social research in government**

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/515296/ethics\\_guidance\\_tcm6-5782.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/515296/ethics_guidance_tcm6-5782.pdf)

**Academy of Social Sciences: Five ethical principles for social science research:** generic ethics principles for social science research

<https://www.acss.org.uk/developing-generic-ethics-principles-social-science/academy-adopts-five-ethical-principles-for-social-science-research/>

**Health Research Authority: Research Ethics Service and Research Ethics Committees**

<https://www.hra.nhs.uk/about-us/committees-and-services/res-and-recs/>

**UK Statistics Authority: National Statistician's Data Ethics Advisory Committee**

<https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/about-the-authority/committees/nsdec/>

**ESRC Framework for Research Ethics 2015**

<https://esrc.ukri.org/files/funding/guidance-for-applicants/esrc-framework-for-research-ethics-2015/>

**Department for Work and Pensions Ethics Group**

Doing the right thing: outlining the Department for Work and Pensions' approach to ethical and legal issues in social research.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20130402230103/http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/WP11.pdf>

**British Sociological Association: Guidelines on ethical research**

<https://www.britsoc.co.uk/ethics>

**European Commission: Ethics in social sciences and humanities, 2018**

[https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/h2020\\_ethics-soc-science-humanities\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/other/hi/h2020_ethics-soc-science-humanities_en.pdf)

## 6.2 Informed consent

### *Links*

#### **Mental capacity:**

Mental Capacity Act 2005 England; Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000

NHS guidance: <http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/social-care-and-support-guide/Pages/mental-capacity.aspx>

Adults with Incapacity (Scotland) Act 2000:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2000/4/contents>

Mental Capacity Act (Northern Ireland) 2016:

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2016/18/contents/enacted>

UREC. (2019). Research involving adult participants who lack the capacity to consent. (2019).

Available at: [https://www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.165638!/file/SREGP-Adults-LCC.pdf](https://www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.165638!/file/SREGP-Adults-LCC.pdf)

#### **Research with children:**

Medical Research Council. 2004. Medical Research Involving Children. Available at:

[http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/ethical\\_guidance/children\\_guidance\\_30\\_33\\_refuse\\_treatment.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/ethical_guidance/children_guidance_30_33_refuse_treatment.asp)  
<https://www.mrc.ac.uk/documents/pdf/medical-research-involving-children/>

Shaw, C., Mai Brady, L. and Davey, C. (2011). Guidelines for research with children and young people. National Children's Bureau. Available at:

<https://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachment/NCB%20guidelines%20CYP.pdf>

#### **Incentives:**

Ruth W Grant, R.W. and Sugarman, J. (2004). 'Ethics in human subjects research: do incentives matter?'. Journal of Medicine and Philosophy, 29. Available at:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03605310490883046>

#### **Social media:**

Association of Internet Research (2012). Ethical decision-making and internet research.

Available at: <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2>

GOV.UK: Social Media Research Guidance; using social media for social research:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-media-research-guidance-using-social-media-for-social-research>

Social media research: a guide to ethics. Available at:  
[https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media\\_487729\\_smxx.pdf](https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_487729_smxx.pdf)

### **Consent and the 2018 Data Protection Act (GDPR):**

Information Commissioner's Office, Consent guide: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/lawful-basis-for-processing/consent/>

### **GDPR and exemptions:**

Information Commissioner's Office: [www.ico.org.uk](http://www.ico.org.uk)  
See a detailed account on the ICO website: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/exemptions/>

MRS-SRA. (2020). GDPR Guidance for Social Research: <https://www.the-sra.org.uk/SRA/Resources/Good-practice/SRA/Resources/Good-Practice.aspx>

## ***References***

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011). The ethics of research with children and young people: a practical handbook. London: Sage.

Health Research Association: Informing participants and seeking consent. Updated 4 September 2019: <https://www.hra.nhs.uk/planning-and-improving-research/best-practice/informing-participants-and-seeking-consent/>

## ***Further reading***

Ethical Research Involving Children (ERIC): <http://childethics.com/>

Farrell, A. (2005). Ethical research with children. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Richards, S., Clark, J. and Boggis, A. (2015). Ethical research with children: untold narratives and taboos. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

## **6.3 Confidentiality and anonymity**

### ***Links***

Human Rights Act 1998: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents>

Transferring personal data outside the UK/EU: <https://ico.org.uk/make-a-complaint/eu-us-privacy-shield/>

Elliot, M.J., Mackey, E., O'Hara, K. and Tudor, C. (2016). The anonymisation decision-making framework. UK Anonymisation Network.

### ***Further reading***

Crow, G. and Wiles, R. (2008). Managing anonymity and confidentiality in social research: the case of visual data in community research. ESRC National Centre for Research Methods NCRM Working Paper Series 8/08. Available at: [http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/459/1/0808\\_managing%2520anonymity%2520and%2520confidentiality.pdf](http://eprints.ncrm.ac.uk/459/1/0808_managing%2520anonymity%2520and%2520confidentiality.pdf)

What is personal data? Information Commissioner's Office: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-data-protection/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/key-definitions/what-is-personal-data/>

Woodfield, K. (ed.) (2018). The ethics of online research: advances in research ethics and integrity, volume 2. Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited.

## 6.4 Avoiding harm

### *Links*

Principle 4 in the Government Social Research Unit, Professional guidance on ethical assurance, 'Avoidance of personal harm': [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/515296/ethics\\_guidance\\_tcm6-5782.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/515296/ethics_guidance_tcm6-5782.pdf)

Academy of Social Science generic principle 5 'All social science should aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm': [http://www.acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Ethics-Final-Principles\\_16\\_06\\_2014.pdf](http://www.acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Ethics-Final-Principles_16_06_2014.pdf)

Many professional bodies have their own guidelines. See for example:

The British Psychological Society: <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-human-research-ethics-2nd-edition-2014>

Market Research Society: <https://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/undertaking-safe-face-to-face-data-collection>

SRA: <https://www.the-sra.org.uk/SRA/Resources/Good-practice/SRA/Resources/Good-Practice.aspx>

Suzy Lamplugh Trust, personal safety advice: <https://www.suzylamplugh.org/Pages/Category/personal-safety-advice>

### *References*

Brown, V., Strauss, J., LaBarb, K., Golde, A., McCarthy G. and Morey, R. (2014). 'Acute effects of trauma-focused research procedures on participant safety and distress'. *Psychiatry Research*, 215(1): 154-158. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4276126/pdf/nihms623984.pdf>

Iphofen, R. (2011). *Ethical decision-making in social research: a practical guide*. London: Macmillan.

Israel, M. and Hay, I. (2006). 'Avoiding harm and doing good' in Research Ethics for Social Scientists. London: Sage.

Kara, H. (2018). Research ethics in the real world. Bristol: Policy Press.

Legerski, J-P, and Bunnell, S.L. (2010). 'The risks, benefits, and ethics of trauma-focused research participation'. Ethics & Behavior, 20: 429-442. Available at:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10508422.2010.521443>

Maxine X., Patel M., Doku, V. and Tennakoon, L. (2003). 'Challenges in recruitment of research participants'. Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 9: 229-238. Available at:

<http://apt.rcpsych.org/content/9/3/229>

Sleat, M. (2013). 'Responsible to whom? Obligations to participants and society' in Social Science Research: Discussion 'Stimulus' Paper for Symposium 2: (Values) p.16.

<https://www.acss.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/Professional-Briefings-3-Ethics-r.pdf>

## 6.5 Questionable research practices

### *Links*

UK Government. (2015). Aqua Book: Guidance on producing quality analysis for government. (Useful information on analytical assurance):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-aqua-book-guidance-on-producing-quality-analysis-for-government>

UK Government. Uncertainty toolkit for analysts in government:

<https://analystsuncertaintytoolkit.github.io/UncertaintyWeb/index.html>

## 6.6 Ethical foundations

### *Links*

Academy of Social Sciences. (2015). Generic ethics principles for social science research:

<https://www.acss.org.uk/developing-generic-ethics-principles-social-science/academy-adopts-five-ethical-principles-for-social-science-research/>