Conducting Ethical Research Info Sheet

Richmond,

The American International University in London

Purpose of Info Sheet

The purpose of this info sheet is to make researchers (undergraduate, post-graduate and professional) aware of the ethical codes that may arise throughout the research process and to encourage them to take responsibility for their own ethical practices. If social research is to remain of benefit to society and the groups and individuals within it, then social researchers must be aware of the potential public impact of their research, conduct their work responsibly and in compliance with the ethical and legal guidelines prevalent in British academia. In particular, researchers should be aware that research about politically and socially sensitive subject areas carries safety risks to the researchers themselves, to the institution under whose auspices they are conducting research and to the human participants involved in that research. If the legal requirements of your professional or funding body require you to gain ethical consent for your research, then you must apply through this process.

This info sheet will not offer an exhaustive list of all the ethical issues that may and do arise in conducting research but it will offer general guidance on five of the most pressing issues related to research: 1) safety issues; 2) transparency; 3) research with human participants; 4) online research; 5) data confidentiality and protection (compliance with GDPR legislation).

General Principles and Guidelines

Not all research projects require approval from the Research Ethics Committee. Research projects not necessarily requiring ethical approval include:

1) Studies involving information freely available in the public domain and the analysis of secondary datasets, either open source or obtained from researchers, where the data have been properly anonymised and informed consent was obtained at the time of collection of the relevant data.
2) Research involving the use of elite interviews with public figures (elected officials, public officials, business, social and cultural leaders) on matters pertaining

exclusively to their public role (nonetheless, researchers need to obtain written consent from the participants).

All research projects that are considered to be sensitive and/or involve human participants must be subject to two-tiered approval process. Students should discuss with their supervisors whether their projects involve safety risks to researchers, and/or the institution, and/or participants. If the research project is deemed to be of high risk, researchers need to complete and submit a Research Safety Questionnaire in addition to the Research Ethics Approval Form (the process will be explained below).

Conducting High Risk Research

Researchers should be aware that some areas of research involve risks to their own safety, the safety of the institution and the safety of the human participants involved in the project. Risks arising as a direct result of research may include:

- **Risk of harm to researchers** due to the location the research is being undertaken in (unsafe locations either online or in the physical world, lone working, etc.) or due to the research methods being used or topic being researched.
- **Risk of harm (physical, physiological or emotional) to participants** during data collection (being interviewed about past or current traumatic events), or the risk could arise after they have finished their participation in the research.
- **Risk to individuals, groups or communities not participating in the research**, but who could be impacted due to the topic being researched, or because of information provided by research participants/through data collection; for example risk of persecution or harm to reputation.
- **Legal and reputational risks to the institution i**f the research project involves researching groups, individuals and organisations involved in illegal and potentially violent activities.

Risks can also arise as a consequence of the research being undertaken and/or published. Consequential risks can be harder to manage as they relate to the actions or reactions of the outside world, however, it is important that these potential risks are

identified and planned for at an early stage, in order that the risks of harm can be managed and mitigated properly. For example;

- After a paper on a highly emotive or political topic is published, the authors could be at risk of a backlash or personal attack from individuals or groups, such as activists or 'hate' groups.
- The results of research could be taken and used by others with the intent of causing harm.

I**f the project is deemed to be of high risk by the supervisor of the project the following steps need to be followed:**

1)The applicants need to complete and submit a **Research Safety Questionnaire.**

2) The Research Safety Questionnaire together with the Research Ethics Approval Form, are submitted to the supervisor of the project. If approved, the safety questionnaire together with the filled Research Ethics Approval Form are submitted to the Research Ethics Committee.

3) If the submission is not approved by the supervisor, the researcher needs to reconsider and redraft a new submission that meets the Research Ethics requirements of the university.

4) If the Research Ethics Committee approves the application the Researcher can start the research project. But if the Research Ethics Committee rejects the application, the researcher needs to reconsider and redraft a new submission that meets the Research Ethics requirements of the university.

Last but not least, given the insufficient training in research ethics provided in Richmond's undergraduate programmes, and the sensitive and potentially disturbing nature of some research topics, undergraduate students cannot conduct research which is considered sensitive or of high risk as it has been defined in this document.

Transparency

Researchers should clarify in advance the respective obligations of the employer or funder and social researcher; they should, for example, refer the employer or funder to the relevant parts of a professional code to which they adhere. For example, Psychology faculty would refer to the British Psychological Society ethics guidelines. Researchers should ensure that

sponsors and funders of research appreciate the obligations that social researchers have not only to them, but also to society at large, research participants and professional colleagues.

Research with Human Participants: Gaining Informed Consent

All research carried out with human participants must first undergo ethics approval by your instructor (for course-level smaller-scale assessments) or by the Research Ethics Committee. When research involves human participation, social researchers must strive to protect subjects from undue harm arising as a consequence of their participation in research. This requires that subjects' participation should be **voluntary and as fully informed as possible** and no group should be disadvantaged by routinely being excluded from consideration.

Inquiries involving human subjects should be based on the freely given informed consent of subjects. Even if participation is required by law, it should still be as informed as possible. In voluntary inquiries, subjects should not be under the impression that they are required to participate. They should be aware of their **entitlement to refuse at any stage** for whatever reason and to withdraw data supplied.

Gaining informed consent is a procedure for ensuring that research subjects understand what is being done to them, the limits to their participation and awareness of any potential risks they incur. The principle of informed consent from subjects is necessarily vague, since it depends for its interpretation on unstated assumptions about the amount of information and the nature of consent required to constitute acceptable practice. Informed consent must be prospective, that is, participants expressly give consent to research before taking part. Researchers are required to explain to the human participants the following aspects of the research project: 1) the purpose of the research project; 2) how the gathered data will be used and stored; 3) the right of human participants to withdraw their consent at any stage of the research project; 4) the right to be debriefed.

Researchers should consider carefully the possibility that the research experience may be a disturbing one and should attempt, when necessary, to find ways to minimise or alleviate any distress caused to those participating in the research. Special care should be taken where research participants are **particularly vulnerable by virtue of factors such as age, disability, gender, their physical or mental health**. Researchers will need to take into account the legal and ethical complexities involved in those circumstances where there are particular

difficulties in eliciting fully informed consent. In some circumstances proxies may be needed to be used in order to gather data.

Main guidelines:

1) If prospective consent is required then participants in your research should fill in a Participant Informed Consent Form. The informed consent form should describe the aims and objectives of the project, and the procedures involved in the research, explain that participation is voluntary, and explain that they may withdraw from the research at any time without penalty and for any reason.
2) If participants are underage, or in a vulnerable situation consent should be obtained from the relevant authorities (ethics subcommittee, schools, guardians, parents, etc), but the researchers should also seek the consent of the participants.
3) Participants have the right to not to answer questions
4) Participants should be given assurances about the confidentiality of the information they provide. Guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity given to research participants must be honoured, unless there are clear and overriding reasons to do otherwise.
5) If the research project involves the recording of interviews, participants should consent to that recording and, when appropriate, should obtain copyright clearance.
6) All participants should be debriefed upon completion of the research participation; this will involve telling them more about the aims and objectives of the project, and allowing time for questions. Note: It is compulsory for a debrief sheet to be given to participants in Psychology; applicants in other disciplines should consult their supervisor.

Neither consent from the participants or the legal requirement to participate absolves the social researcher from an obligation to protect the participant as far as possible against potentially harmful effects of participating. The social researcher should try to minimise disturbance both to subjects themselves and to the subjects' relationships with their environment. Social researchers should help participants to protect their own interests by giving them prior information about the consequences of participating.

Data Protection

Social researchers are frequently furnished with privileged information by the funder or employer who may legitimately require it to be kept confidential. Researchers should strive to keep the confidentiality of that data. When conducting research with human subjects, researchers must respect their anonymity. If you undertake research that uses or collects personal information about identifiable, living people then you will need to comply with the Data Protection Data of 2018. Methods and procedures that have been utilised to produce published data should not, however, be kept confidential. Researchers must process all personal data in accordance with the 'data protection principles', unless there is a relevant exemption

The UK data protection legislation is set out in the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA) and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (which also forms part of UK law).

The introduction of GDPR brought in with it significantly increased penalties for non-compliance. Errors could result in Richmond's ability to collect and interrogate research data being curtailed or stopped altogether. Errors could also harm the reputation of Richmond University.

Guiding Principles on Handling Private Data

- **Lawfulness**. Fairness and transparency: this means personal data should be processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner in relation to the individual. The transparency and fairness provisions are usually met through privacy notices, which are explained in greater detail in the "Fair Processing?" FAQs below
- **Purpose Limitation**. This means personal data should only be collected for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes and not be further processed in a manner that is incompatible with those purposes. You should specify the purpose in your privacy notice.
- **Data Minimisation**. This means personal data should be limited to what is necessary in relation to the purpose for they are being processed, e.g. if you are only sending a newsletter by email, you will probably only need an individual's name and email address.

- **Accuracy**. This means that you should take reasonable steps to keep personal data up to date and ensure that personal data that is inaccurate, having regard to the purpose for which they are processed, are erased or rectified without delay.
- **Storage Limitation**. This means personal data should be kept in a form which permits identification of data subjects for no longer than is necessary. This means you should decide how long it is necessary to retain information give the purposes that it was collected for and securely delete information when it is no longer needed for those purposes.
- **Integrity and Confidentiality**. This means personal data should be processed in a manner that ensures appropriate security of that personal data, such as protection against unauthorised processing, accidental loss, destruction or damage.
- **Accountability**. This means that researchers and the university (legally known as the Controller) shall be responsible for, and be able to demonstrate compliance with, the above six principles.

Personal data must:

- be processed lawfully, fairly and in a transparent manner
- be collected only for specified, explicit and legitimate purposes, and not be further processed in any manner incompatible with those purposes;
- be adequate, relevant and limited to what is necessary in relation to the purposes for which it is processed;
- be accurate and, where necessary, kept up-to-date;
- not be kept as identifiable data for longer than necessary for the purposes concerned;
- be processed securely.

Declaring a Lawful Basis for Processing Data Protection

When you are processing personal data, you must establish your 'lawful basis' to do so. Please be aware that under GDPR you need a lawful basis for processing each of the data categories i.e. 'a lawful basis' to process 'personal data' and a separate lawful basis to process 'special category' data (these can sometimes be the same lawful basis).

Privacy notices are the standard way to document the lawful basis for processing. You will also need to include other information in your privacy notice including the purposes for which you have obtained the personal data, the categories of recipient of that data (internal and external), the retention period, any overseas transfers and the individual's rights.

Additional information needs to be provided when you receive personal data indirectly form a third party, e.g. the categories of personal data you hold and the source.

If your purposes change over time or you have a new purpose which you did not originally anticipate, you may not need a new lawful basis as long as your new purpose is compatible with the original purpose.

However, the data protection legislation specifically says this does not apply to 'processing' based on consent. You need to either get fresh consent which specifically covers the new purpose or find a different basis for the new purpose.

If you are processing special category personal data, you need to identify both a lawful basis for processing personal data and an additional lawful basis for special category condition as set out in Article 9 of the GDPR. You should document both your lawful bases for processing and your special category condition so that you can demonstrate compliance and accountability.

Those bases include:

- explicit consent;
- employment law;
- vital interests;
- information made public by the individual;
- legal claims;
- substantial public interest;
- preventative/occupational medical purposes;
- public health;
- research, provided there are safeguards and it is the public interest.

If you are processing data about criminal convictions, criminal offences, or related security measures, you also need both a lawful basis for processing, which are set out in the data protection legislation and which are similar to the bases above. You should document both

your lawful bases for processing and your criminal offence data condition so that you can demonstrate compliance and accountability.

Online Research

Research relies increasingly in using the internet as both a tool to collect and analyse data and as a space to conduct research. Each of these dimensions has raised new questions about research ethics. These include:

- establishing the role of researchers in online spaces
- distinguishing public and private settings online
- obtaining informed consent.

Role of Researcher

The internet and other digital spaces are used as field sites, similar to ethnographic research conducted offline in public and private spaces like shops, parks, or offices. As field sites, researchers observe individual's behaviours and interactions in digital spaces, including in discussion fora, social media platforms, and email list-servs. Like in all fieldwork, researchers must have a clear understanding of their role within the study prior collecting data and interacting with research participants. Roles researchers can take within fieldwork include:

- unobtrusive observation – there is no interaction with individuals and individuals are unaware of being observed
- open observation – participants are aware of the study and have given prior consent
- participant observation – participants are aware of the study, have given consent, and the researcher directly interacts with participants

Public and Private Online Settings

While in principle all research requires prior consent, it is not always achievable in fieldwork to obtain the informed consent of every person who may be observed within the study. Within offline fieldwork, researchers must receive permission to enter any private space in order to conduct observational work, such as museums, shops, schools, business, and so on. This informed consent is given by someone in a leadership position and the terms of the data collection are clearly agreed upon in advance, e.g. anonymity of individuals within the space, no photographs, etc.

Distinguishing between public and private settings online can be less clear cut. The difference between public and private online settings, where data is collected, is on a continuum from free and open internet spaces (characterized by no necessary registration or log-ins for users) to private spaces (that require permission to access). There are also gray zones, such as subscription emails, free registration sites, etc. Gray area settings may involve users sharing sensitive information but without the expectation of a wide readership on the part of the posters (like some forums), and must be carefully considered by researchers in these spaces. In addition to determining if a site is fully public, semi-public, or private members-only, researchers should consider the norms and user's agreements in terms of participating in these sites, and if there are any special factors in terms of risk, vulnerable populations, or sensitive topics that require additional steps to ensure ethical compliance.

Prior to entering the field site, researchers need to clearly state 1) the nature of any online setting where information is being collected, 2) the duration of the study, 3) the way the data will be collected and stored, and 4) what will be done with that information. Ethical issues (i.e. harm, safety, privacy, confidentiality, anonymity, and intellectual property) must be evaluated at each stage of the research process. If permission is required to enter the space, consent should be obtained prior to data collection. If there will be interaction with participants, consent should be obtained from all individuals. Issues of privacy, confidentiality, and intellectual property must be respected.

Because of the more blurred nature of public and private online settings, digital fieldwork thus requires that researchers consider the reputational risks and harms and forms of personal identifiability that may accompany online data collection and publication. They must also consider personal harms they could incur through data collection. These may be the result of 1) visiting state and corporate surveilled websites and digital spaces and 2) trolling and doxing by online users as a consequence of the data collection and publication. There must be a plan in place to manage these various dimensions prior to data collection.

Informed Consent

Informed consent is characterized by participants being aware of the nature of the study in which they are participating, understanding the expectations placed on them, and being able to ask questions prior to participation. Informed consent further requires participants to be of sound mind and capable of giving meaningful consent, which includes being of legal age to consent.

The online environment raises two issues in terms of informed consent. The first relates to accessing public and private online settings. Informed consent, as previously noted, must be obtained from data collection within private spaces, especially if there is any expectation of interaction with users of the space. Semi-private spaces or public spaces in which users may expect high degrees of privacy need to be carefully evaluated for potential harms to both the user and researcher. The other issue in terms of informed consent concerns the ability of users to be anonymous within many online environments. This potentially means that participants may not meet the requirements of informed consent. This risk must be assessed by the researcher to a reasonable extent, while recognizing that deception on the part of participants is unlikely and never guaranteed in any research, on or offline.

Obtaining Ethics Approval to Conduct Research from the Ethics Committee

At Richmond University, research that involves collecting new data from human participants will require ethical approval (the only exception applies to elite interviews with public figures on matters pertaining to public life). Human participation will be taken in the broadest sense possible, incorporating all forms of primary data collection from humans (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, observations, taking/using materials from humans, invasive/intrusive procedures or collecting data in any form) where the data being collected is primarily to be used as research data. However, it the responsibility of the researcher to consult the guidelines of their relevant professional agency/funding body when deciding whether ethical approval is required

Where a project does not involve human participation it is usually the case that ethical approval is not required. However, there may be exceptional cases where a research study does not strictly involve human participation but does raise associated ethical issues with respect to potential social and/or environmental implications of the research activities and how these may impact on humans. If you feel that your project may require ethical approval the Ethics Committee should be contacted for further advice.

How to Obtain Research Ethics Approval

Step One – Consult the requirements of your relevant professional or funding body.

Step Two – Complete the Ethics Application Form found in the portal. You also need to complete the Research Safety Questionnaire if your project is considered sensitive or of high risk. Whenever possible consult your course tutor, or the Research Ethics Committee for more information.

Step Three – Submit the Application Form to the approval of your Supervisor.

Step Four – Submit the Application Form (or forms in case you are conducting High Risk Research) to the approval of the Research Ethics Committee to the following email: researchethics@richmond.ac.uk

Step Five – The Research Ethics Committee will respond to your application within 7 working days. If your research project is categorised as 'high risk' it might take longer to assess your application.

Application Outcomes and Appeals

There are three possible outcomes of a submission to the Ethics Committee. Firstly, your project, and all supplementary materials are approved, and you may start your research. Secondly, you may be asked to resubmit certain pieces of information. This will not necessitate a new application, and the Committee will guide you as to what needs to be changed, and what is already satisfactory. Thirdly, there may be occasions where the Committee will reject a project due to concerns over the nature of the research. This will usually require a reapplication to the Committee, along with a demonstration that the work proposed is in line with the internationally accepted protocol for work in that field (for instance, all biomedical research must be in line with the Declaration of Helsinki).

If you believe you have grounds to disagree with a rejection from the Committee, then you are asked to make an appeal to the Provost of the University. To do this, you should submit the materials you sent to the Ethics Committee, followed by a cover letter explaining why you believe your work meets the requirements for ethical consideration by email, to the Provost.

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