



 TRAINING MATERIALS

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# Training Guide: Introduction to Ethics in Social Research



# What are Research Ethics and why are they important?

Research Ethics govern the way in which researchers carry out their work, with the overarching aim to preserve the rights, dignity, safety and welfare of both participants and researchers. Research Ethics mean that the entire research process is carried out with integrity, transparency, and honesty, and that potential risks are accounted for and minimised as much as possible. Whilst Research Ethics is essentially about 'doing the right thing', there are lots of complexities, considerations, and guidelines to be aware of. Research ethics is a live area of debate, and new ethical dilemmas often arise as our ways of working, and society's morals and standards change.

“ Ethics refers to well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues. Ethics also involves the study and development of our own ethical standards via continual examination of our moral beliefs and conduct.<sup>1</sup>

# National Research Guidelines

Historically, some research involving human subjects has been highly unethical, disregarding human rights and set in racist, ageist and classist agendas.

Over time, research ethics frameworks and codes have been shaped by the need to protect people from exploitation and harm. There are overarching global standards, like the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but the codes and guidelines for governing human research can vary a lot around the world. In Australia, The National Statement

on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) ('National Statement') sets national standards for conducting human research. It is intended for use by:

- > any researcher based in Australia who is conducting research with human participants anywhere in the world;
- > any member of an ethical review body reviewing that research;
- > those involved in research governance; and,
- > potential research participants.

The purpose of the National Statement is to promote ethically good human research, ensuring that participants be given respect and protection from harm. It also involves the fostering of research that is of benefit to the community.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham, A., Powell, M., Taylor, N., Anderson, D., & Fitzgerald, R. (2013). *Ethical Research Involving Children*. UNICEF Office of Research.



### Integrity

In respecting the rights of participants and researchers, it is important that research is always conducted with integrity and honesty.

Researchers need to ensure that the process is transparent and that participants are fully aware of what they will be asked to do and how their contributions will be used. It is important that researchers have the experience, qualifications and competence to enable the research to be carried out appropriately and ethically.

# Ethical principles in research



### Justice

Research that is ethical is fair and just. Fairness should be considered in all aspects of the research design, including in recruitment of participants, burdens on participants, accurate reporting of results, and accessible reporting.



### Beneficence

Researchers are responsible for designing the research to minimise the risks of harm, stress or discomfort to participants, and maximising any benefits. Benefits may be experienced by participants and the wider community.



### Respect

Researchers should respect the privacy, confidentiality and cultural sensitivities of the participants. Respect for human beings involves ensuring that they are free to make their own decisions.

## Key ethical considerations

The actual practice of ethics in social research can be complex and pose many ethical questions that researchers must navigate. Human research can involve significant risks, and, despite the best of intentions and careful planning, these risks can occur. It's therefore important to be aware of key ethical considerations when it comes to human research, and what is considered best practice (acknowledging that this may vary based on the context of the research).

### Harms and benefits

Ethical research should bring about good and do no harm. Harms can occur in any research study, qualitative or quantitative. Researchers must carefully reflect on any risks of potential harms, discomforts or inconveniences to participants. Harms can be physical (illness or injury), psychological (stress, embarrassment, anger), social (damages to relationships, stigmatisation), economic and legal. There are contextual and personal factors that influence how harms are felt, so the impact of harms are different for everyone. Researchers must be prepared to respond to any risks, and have strategies in place to minimise risks and maximise benefits. The

benefits of the research may include producing new knowledge or insight, empowering participants to be included in investigation of issues that impact their lives, the improvement of services, and gaining skills and expertise for researchers.

“Research is ethically acceptable only when its potential benefits justify any risks involved in the research.”<sup>2</sup>

### Informed consent

To protect participants from deception and psychological harm, researchers must obtain informed consent. Informed consent means that a participant has sufficient

information and understanding of the research study, knows what is required of them, what will happen to their data and what rights they have to access or withdraw from the research. Gaining informed consent shows honesty - that the researcher has not deceived participants about the study.

Often, written consent is obtained through providing participant information sheets and receiving signed consent forms, but also can be provided verbally, or electronically through online surveys. Researchers need to make sure that potential participants know that their agreement to participate is completely voluntary and that they are free to opt out before, during, or after their initial participation. Participants should be able

Ethical research with children and young people brings new ethical issues, such as power differentials, ability to provide informed consent, and a range of potential risks to participants' wellbeing.

See the [Ethical Research with Children Hub](#), which provides in-depth ethics guidance for research involving children and young people.

to follow up with any questions or concerns they may have about a project with the researcher who can provide them with further information. It is important that information sheets and consent forms are written in language that participants can easily read and understand and that they are free of technical jargon.

Under the National Statement, consent should be provided by the individual themselves. However, there may be circumstances where others are involved in an individual's decision to take part, if a person lacks capacity to provide fully informed consent (such as those highly dependent on medical care, and people living with an intellectual disability or mental illness). The National Statement also requires the consent of parents, guardians or caregivers for young people under 18 years, as well as from the young person. The issue of deciding upon an individual's capacity to consent is highly contested, and can vary based on a multitude of social, environmental and cultural factors.

### Confidentiality

In a world where technology and the Internet is now a common feature of everyday life, it is important that we maintain the privacy of participants and strive to protect personal information. A breach of confidentiality violates a person's rights and can pose harm, from embarrassment and shame, to stigmatisation, and even damage to social and economic status, such as loss of employment.

A participant information sheet should detail how an individual's identity will be protected. Researchers use a number of methods to keep participant's identity confidential, for example, through the use of password

protected files and encryption when storing data online. Often, study participants will not be identified by names, but by other identifiers, such as gender and/or age. Where a name and other information that could be used to identify the participant is collected, data is often 'de-identified'. This means that names are changed to a pseudonym or unique identifier, and any other identifying information (such as where the person lives or works) is removed for analysis and publication in reports or papers. Further, researchers should only report findings that are relevant to the research and that do not reveal the identity of any one individual.

### Accessibility and inclusion

Social research is about the experiences of human individuals, groups, and communities. To create meaningful outcomes, research should be equitable, non-discriminatory, accessible and inclusive, particularly for underrepresented groups. Some of these communities may include:

- People living with a disability (including physical, intellectual and psycho-social impairments);
- LGBTQIA+ communities;
- People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and non-English speaking backgrounds;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities;
- Children and young people;
- Individuals from low socio-economic backgrounds; and
- Groups with low digital literacy/access.

To be inclusive and accessible, research should carefully consider what approaches and methods of research will be appropriate with different groups. To do so, researchers should consult with people with lived experience early on in the research design to ensure the concerns and needs of people who may be asked to participate in the research can inform research questions and methods. Research can also be more accessible and inclusive by including those with lived experience in the research topic as co-researchers or peer researchers. The participation of marginalised groups can

enhance the accuracy and authenticity of the final research results and their applications.

### Compensation

Researchers should aim to appropriately compensate participants for their efforts, contributions and time, especially if participation could leave them at a financial loss, or cause them to miss out on study or work. Where participants are required to travel, compensation can be provided to participants through reimbursement for any costs (e.g. travel, parking, accommodation), or for their time. Common examples of compensation for research participants in Australia include gift cards.

The potentially most ethically problematic form of payment to research participants is an incentive, which is used to encourage participation, for example, the chance to win a prize for completing a survey. While it is understandable that incentives may be required to recruit and maintain participants in a study, such incentives cannot be set at levels that would unduly influence a participant to take part or remain in a study.

Whatever the compensation, participants must be informed about what they will, or won't, receive. It is important to consider the age of participants, cultural context, the level of risk of the project, and participant vulnerability when deciding upon compensation. In some contexts, forms of compensation other than monetary values, may be more appropriate.

## TRAINING ACTIVITY

Download this [Miro board](#) for interactive worksheets to explore benefits, risks and strategies to minimise risks.



Download this [pocket-guide to these key ethical considerations](#).

# Case Studies of Ethical Challenges in Youth Research

For more case studies of ethical challenges, see the [Ethical Research Involving Children hub](#).

## CASE STUDY #1

### Using incentives in youth research<sup>3</sup>

The researchers in this project explored how youth programs can contribute to positive developmental outcomes for young people aged 12 – 18 years. To do this, they needed to recruit a large number of young people from diverse backgrounds and gain the consent of young people, their parents, guardians, teachers and programme leaders.

### The ethical challenge:

The researchers needed to decide upon an incentive that would encourage participation from young people in a relevant and attractive way, without applying any undue influence. It was important to mediate the differential power relationship between young people and adults in their roles as parent, guardian, teacher and programme leaders.

### Strategy:

The researchers decided to use a mix of incentives and revealed different incentive options at the outset of the research project so that everyone involved was fully informed.

The first incentive was altruism-based to gain support and consent from adults. It was hoped that this strategy would appeal to young people that saw the value of the research. Each young person was presented with an individually named certificate of appreciation and presented with “thank you” messages throughout their participation, from the site visits to visual messages of ‘thank you’ at the beginning and end of the questionnaire and in the information and consent packages.

The second part of the strategy was a financial incentive. Each young person was offered the opportunity to go into a prize draw of \$20 gift vouchers. Although each single prize was small in value, each young person had a one-in-four chance of winning, making it a more equitable form of incentive as it was widely shared. Only retail store specific gift vouchers were offered (and not retail chain specific to reduce the chance they could be used to purchase alcohol).

The researchers concluded that the coercive effect of incentives can be minimised by moderating and contextualising their use and by emphasising voluntary consent at all levels.

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<sup>3</sup> Seymour, K. (2012). Using incentives: encouraging and recognising participation in youth research. *Youth Studies Australia*, 31(3), 51-59.

## CASE STUDY #2

### Using stories to obtain informed consent from 4-year-olds<sup>4</sup>

The researchers in this project explored 4-year-old children's experiences of outdoor learning in an early childhood education in Perth. The researchers were interested in learning about children's perspectives of student-centred and inquiry-driven learning experiences in these settings.

### The ethical challenge:

The main ethical challenge that arose in this project was getting the staff of the childhood centres to contribute to a respectful research culture, whereby the voices of children could be heard and realised in the research. The researchers needed to ensure that the child participants were able to make informed choices about their participation in the research and were given opportunities to give their consent or dissent.

### Strategy:

The researchers employed a tool called 'informing stories' - in practice, an 'informing story' - to provide child-friendly information about the research project, helping the children to gain an understanding of their rights and other ethical concepts. These stories were conveyed via interactive technologies and reading strategies. Through this, the researchers and educators were able to support the children in making informed choices about their participation in the research process. It also helped to clarify the expectations of the research for the educators and the parents of the child participants, providing a common ground of understanding with all parties involved.

## CASE STUDY #3

### Interviewing young people on sensitive topics<sup>5</sup>

As part of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, researchers were tasked with understanding how children and young people experience safety and the ways that they think adults and organisations should prevent and respond to instances of child abuse.

### The ethical challenge:

Being a very sensitive and mature issue to discuss with children and young people, the researchers had to devise a method of facilitating these discussions about child sexual abuse with participants in a way that would protect them from material that could be triggering or cause them discomfort or distress.

### Strategy:

The researchers opted to conduct semi-structured interviews with participants that involved a more casual, open-ended dialogue. The focus of the interview was to be driven by the young person themselves, allowing for them to guide the discussion in a direction that they felt comfortable with. For example, participants were asked to make two mind-maps labelled 'safe' and 'unsafe', and for each mind-map they were asked to consider 'who', 'where' 'when' and 'what' made them feel that way. Then, the researchers asked the participant to choose some of their needs from their mind-map and consider whether those needs were being responded to by organisations. As such, the young person had the power to choose what they did and did not want to speak about during the interview.

4 Mayne, F., & Howitt, C. (2022). *The Narrative Approach to informed consent: Empowering young children's rights and meaningful participation*. Routledge: Oxford.

5 Moore, T., McArthur, M., Roche, S., Death, J., & Tilbury, C. (2016). *Safe and Sound: Exploring the Safety of Young People in Residential Care: a Report for the Royal Commission Into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*. Canberra: Institute of Child Protection Studies.

# Obtaining ethical approval for university research

In Australia, research conducted in or by universities that involves human participants must be approved by an accredited Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). The primary purpose of a HREC is to protect the welfare and rights of the participants involved in the research.

When applying for ethical approval, researchers need to:

- Be familiar with details in the National Statement, and national and university ethical policies and procedures;
- Ensure their research is supported by methods that are academically, professionally and ethically sound;
- Only start research activity after ethics approval has been issued;

- Ensure their research activities are fully compliant with the terms of their ethics approval;
- Apply for approval of any proposed changes to the methodology, participants, location and research tools before these are actioned; and
- At a minimum, report annually on any approved research projects.

It is important to follow the guidelines, policies and procedures set by your research institution when developing research protocols for ethical approval.

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## Recommended reading

Anh, D. P., Almeida, K., Munyanyiwa, T., Payne, E., Prakash, M., & Senior, I. (2020). [A Better Normal: Girls Call For A Revolutionary Reset](#). PLAN International.

Australian College of Applied Professions. (2021). [Research Ethics: Conducting research with honesty and integrity](#).

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School. *Qualitative Research in Education*, 10(2), 144-171.

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Smart, A. (2018, March 8). [Ethical considerations in research and evaluation with children and young people](#). *Australian Institute of Family Studies*.

The Evergreen State College. (n.d.). [Understanding Confidentiality and Anonymity](#).

University of Western Sydney (2020) [Research Integrity and Ethics](#)

Ussher, J. M., Hawkey, A., Perz, J., Liamputtong, P., Marjadi, B., Schmied, V., Dune, T., Sekar, J. A., Ryan, S., Charter, R., Thepsourinthone, J., Noack-Lundberg, K., & Brook, E. (2020). *Crossing the line:*

*Lived experience of sexual violence among trans women of colour from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds in Australia* (Research report, 14/2020). Sydney: ANROWS.