

Producing a Code of Ethics

STUDENT HANDOUT

Produce a 'code of ethics' that can be given to people who have agreed to take part in your research. This is a document that outlines the ethical standards that you will adopt, under which you will work and that will help to guide the research forward. It lays out how you intend to behave as a researcher, how you will conduct yourself and how you will treat your participants. This document is usually produced in written form, but if you have participants who cannot read, or if there are language difficulties, you may need to think about producing your code of ethics in an alternative format.

You will need to think about who will be given a copy of your code of ethics, especially if you intend to conduct research with children or vulnerable people (a gatekeeper or proxy, for example). The type of recipient will have an influence on the code of ethics that you produce: some people will not want to read (and perhaps will not understand) a detailed and complex list of ethical standards, whereas others may want as much information as they can get, and review it in minute detail. If you have very different people taking part in your research (perhaps with very different educational backgrounds) you may find that you need to produce two codes of ethics: one detailed and one in summary, for example.

The specific issues that you choose to include in your code of ethics will depend on the type of research that you intend to conduct, your research topic, the level at which you are studying and the type of people who are to be involved in your research. The following list gives an example of information that you could include:

- acting ethically within research aims;
- acting ethically within moral and social values;
- acting ethically with participants, treating them with respect, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and ensuring protection of data;
- acting ethically with the wider public;
- conducting research that involves risk;
- collaborating and cooperating ethically;
- publishing and disseminating results ethically;
- addressing conflict of interest;
- avoiding biased financial relationships;
- working with ethical funding bodies;
- obtaining ethical approval.

Once you have produced your code of ethics, test it by asking a member of the public to read it and give you honest feedback about style, structure and content. If possible, try to choose a member of the public who is similar to the people who will take part in your research. Once you have received feedback, modify your code of ethics accordingly.

Understanding Issues of Informed Consent

STUDENT HANDOUT

Produce an information sheet that can be given to your research participants. It should contain all the information they need about your research so that they can decide whether or not to give their informed consent to take part. This sheet would be given to participants before they take part in the research and should be retained by them throughout the research process.

'Informed consent' in research is an agreement that is made by a participant to take part in the research, based on an understanding of what is involved. For this consent to be valid it must be informed, voluntary, free and given by a person who has the capacity to make the decision. A person must understand the purpose, benefits and potential risks of taking part in your research and must be given time to make their decision.

The following points will help you to produce your information sheet:

- Think carefully about how much information and the type of information that is required to help participants make an informed decision about whether or not to take part in your research. This could include, for example, information about the goals of the research, the length and degree of commitment required, opt-in and opt-out clauses, and issues of anonymity and confidentiality. When doing this, ensure that you address the whole research process, including data collection, analysis and dissemination of results.
- Make sure that you do not mislead your participants or try to persuade them to take part when it might not be the best course of action (perhaps because participation may induce harm or lead to problems with existing relationships, for example). However, in some studies it may be necessary to try a little persuasion to overcome issues with volunteer bias; if this is the case with your research, be aware that there is a fine line between tactical persuasion and duress. Participants should not be coerced, whether implicitly or explicitly, into taking part in your research.
- Use terms that are easily understood by the people who will take part in your research. Pay attention to clarity and comprehension.
- Don't overwhelm your participants with unnecessary and/or incomprehensible detail about the subject of the research, the nature of social inquiry, methodology or social theory, for example.
- If your research is with 'vulnerable' groups (those with a disability, children, or those in a dependent relationship with the researcher, for example) you must pay particular attention to the issue of informed consent. Take care not to use persuasion (whether explicit or implicit) and ensure that your information sheet can be understood (in some cases you may need to present this information orally, rather than in written form). If you are dealing with a proxy, you will need to provide appropriate information to help them make an informed choice on behalf of the participant.

Once you have produced your information sheet, hand it in for tutor review and feedback. Modify as necessary, once you have received feedback.

Treating Participants with Respect

STUDENT HANDOUT

This activity is about treating research participants with respect. Over the next week monitor local and national newspapers, television, social media, micro-blogging sites, blogs, websites and any other relevant channel or platform. Look out for cases where researchers have not treated participants with respect (or where researchers have been disrespectful to participants). You can also look into historical cases where researchers have not treated their participants with respect. Take note of your findings and be prepared to discuss them when we next meet.

When you undertake this activity think about the following questions:

- 1 In what way have the participants not been treated with respect?
- 2 How has the research been reported? Have the problems with respect been highlighted in the report?
- 3 Have the participants themselves highlighted respect issues? If so, what have they said? Has this influenced their behaviour in any way?
- 4 What could or should the researcher have done differently, in your opinion?
- 5 How can these issues be resolved, if at all?
- 6 How can you ensure that you do not make similar mistakes when you carry out your research?

Avoiding Conflict of Interest

STUDENT HANDOUT

Find an example of a research study in which there is, or has been, conflict(s) of interest. This could be a current or ongoing research study, or it could be a study that was carried out in the past. Once you have identified a suitable study, undertake the following tasks:

- 1 Describe the research project.
- 2 Discuss the conflict of interest.
- 3 Analyse how this conflict of interest has influenced (or could potentially influence) the research process and/or outcomes.
- 4 Discuss how conflict of interest could or should have been avoided.
- 5 Discuss ways in which conflict of interest can be avoided in your own research.

Post your answers on the digital platform that has been set up. Read the posts from other students, as this will provide a useful resource that will help you to think more about how to recognize conflict(s) of interest in the work of other researchers and avoid conflict of interest in your own work.

Understanding Biased Financial Relationships

STUDENT HANDOUT

Consider the scenarios given below, in your group, and answer the following questions (answer questions 1-5 for each scenario and finish with question 6). Be prepared to discuss your answers in a class discussion.

- 1 What is the nature of the financial relationship?
- 2 Do you think this financial relationship will have an influence on the design of the research project? If so, in what way?
- 3 Do you think this financial relationship will have an influence on the research results? If so, in what way?
- 4 Do you think this financial relationship will have an influence on how the results of the research are published? If so, in what way?
- 5 What (if anything) can be done to manage, reduce or eliminate the problems you have highlighted?
- 6 When analysing the work of other researchers, how can you check that their work has not been influenced by biased financial relationships?

Scenario 1

A self-employed researcher is commissioned by the principal of a local college to undertake some research into students' experiences of their course. The college is to go through an inspection and the researcher is told that the results of the research must reflect well on the college. Indeed, it is made clear that payment for the research is dependent on a positive outcome.

Scenario 2

A senior researcher at a university in the UK sits on the advisory panel of a national research council. He surprises his colleagues by putting in a bid for funding in a subject outside his area of expertise and on a theme that is not normally funded by the research council. When the research council publishes its themes for the next round of funding, this particular theme is included in the list and his bid is successful.

Scenario 3

A trustee of a neighbourhood community group is married to a local authority (government) employee who finds out that funds are available to support the work of the community group. However, the community group must provide evidence to prove that the local community benefits from the service. The trustee is passionate about her community group and decides to undertake the research herself so that she can prove that the group serves the local community well.

Scenario 4

In a clinical trial one team member is responsible for patient selection. However, that team member owns stocks in the company that is supporting the trial (a share in the company that enables him to profit from company growth and earnings). He decides not to mention this to the principal investigator in charge of the research project.

Scenario 5

Researchers working for a technology company have developed a new material that, they believe, will revolutionize production in their particular field. However, their employers are fearful of competition and also feel that the market is not quite ready for this new product. A board meeting is held to consider their strategy.

Recognizing and Managing the Funding Effect

STUDENT HANDOUT

This activity is a role-play that will highlight the influence of the 'funding effect' on research. This is a term that has been coined by social scientists to explain why research outcomes are sometimes significantly different in publicly funded research and in privately funded research. You will each be assigned a role to play and you will be given 10 minutes of preparation time to think about and prepare your role. The role-play will last for around 20 minutes and will be followed by a class discussion.

The background to the role-play

The management of a breakfast cereal manufacturer commission and fund some research to find out how eating their breakfast cereal can benefit the academic performance of school children. The research team finds that eating the breakfast cereal does improve school academic performance but, in a control study, finds that eating *any* type of breakfast improves school academic performance.

The role-play

The role-play is a committee meeting to discuss when and how the results of the research described above should be disseminated. The meeting is attended by members of the research team, the director of the cereal company and some company shareholders.

The director and shareholders of the company want to maximize market exposure, and do not understand, nor see the need for, ethical behaviour concerning how and when results are published (or suppressed). They are perfectly happy to make bold claims about the results that 'prove' that their cereals are the best for school pupils (and their competitors' brands are the worst). The researchers want to publish because it is the right thing to do and it will help with their research careers, but are they willing to stand their ground and maintain research integrity when reputations, careers and funding are at stake?

Roles

Role 1

You are to play the role of principal investigator. This is the person who has been in charge of the research project from the start. You are an experienced researcher, passionate about research and keen to publish as much as possible to raise your research profile and obtain further funding.

Role 2

You are to play the role of co-investigator. You are an early-career researcher and gradually building up your research portfolio. You are passionate about research and very keen to further your research career. Research ethics are important to you.

Role 3

You are to play the role of research student. You are fairly new to research, have very high ethical standards and are unwilling to compromise on these standards.

Role 4

You are the director of the cereal manufacturer that has funded the research. You are a high-flying individual and want to maintain your company's position as market leader in cereal sales. You have big ambitions for your cereal company and will do what it takes to maximize profit and put your competitors out of business.

Role 5

You are to play the role of a shareholder of the cereal manufacturer. You want to make as much money as you can from your shares in the company. To do this the company should make as much profit as possible. You will do anything to ensure that this happens.

Role 6

You are to play the role of a shareholder of the cereal manufacturer. You have high moral standards, but you also want to make money from your shares.

Role 7

You are to play the role of a shareholder of the cereal manufacturer. Although you want to make money from your shares, you also understand the importance of not misleading the public (and parents, as you have children at school).

Conducting Research with Vulnerable People

STUDENT HANDOUT

Develop a scenario, in your group, about a researcher who intends to conduct research with vulnerable people. Think about the research topic and the type of people who are to participate in the research (and why these people are considered 'vulnerable'). Think also about the research methods that are to be used. You may also want to say a little more about the researcher: who the researcher works for, their position within the organization, how much experience they have in conducting research and working with vulnerable people, for example. You can include any additional information that you wish, such as who is funding the research or the intended purpose and impact of the research.

Once you have developed your scenario, think about potential ethical dilemmas concerning research with vulnerable people that could be faced by the researcher in your scenario. Develop these into a series of bullet points or questions that you can discuss with your classmates when we next meet. You will be allocated 20 minutes to present your scenario and discuss your ethical dilemmas.

Conducting Research with Children

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Consider the five cases given below and for each case discuss the following issues with your group members:

- the practical issues that are involved (access, venue, data collection methods and recording and storing data, for example);
- the ethical issues that are involved (informed consent, working with vulnerable groups, potential risks and harm, for example);
- the difficulties that could, potentially, be encountered by the researchers (when accessing participants, seeking informed consent, collecting data and storing data, for example);
- action that researchers can take to overcome, avoid or reduce the difficulties that have been identified.

Case 1

This research seeks to explore whether learning to read text on a tablet involves different skills from learning to read traditional print books. The research will be conducted with children under the age of 10 in their school environment.

Case 2

This research explores the experiences and perspectives of young people living with HIV and their transition into adult life and adult-orientated services. Researchers intend to contact young people aged 16-18 and interview them in a specialized unit.

Case 3

This research seeks to understand the emotional and mental health needs of children who are excluded from school. The project will involve interviews and focus groups with children aged 12-16, to take place at various locations and venues.

Case 4

This research will invite college students (aged 16-18) to be co-researchers on a project about students and their attitude towards underage drinking. It will explore the influences of underage drinking on social and family relationships.

Case 5

This research seeks to produce national statistics on child abuse and neglect, including online abuse, sexual abuse and physical abuse. The research will involve children under the age of 18.