

Societal impact

When planning a piece of research, researchers should identify any parts of the research that put themselves, participants or the wider environment at risk and are therefore unethical. Researchers should consider the benefits or harm that might result from the research and what impact it could have on participants or the wider community. The results of the research may have a positive or negative impact on those involved, so researchers should consider who they will share their results with and how.

Researchers should adopt additional approaches to community-based research by engaging communities as active partners throughout the research process, focusing on community priorities, and taking extra precautions to assure individual and community privacy. Plans for meaningful dissemination of results to communities should be part of the research design.

The intention of this guidance is to ensure that researchers are informed of the ethical issues they should consider when planning a piece of research, in order to mitigate risks and minimise unintended impact where possible.

The ethical review of a research project is proportionate to the benefit, risk and harm of the research. Some identified risk in a project will not necessarily result in a project failing to gain ethical approval. Some risk in research is acceptable as long as participants are aware, give consent, and are referred to support when required.

Considering the impact of research on society

Researchers should consider potential physical or psychological harm, discomfort, stress or reputational risk to participants and their associates (and participating groups, organisations and funders).

Research, though it may carry no physical risk, may be disruptive and damaging to participants as individuals, or to whole communities or categories of people impacted by the research.

Societal research raises a wide range of ethical issues that need to be considered by researchers.

These include, but are not restricted to, risk to a participant's personal social standing, their privacy, personal values and beliefs, their links to family and the wider community, and their position of employment, as well as the potentially adverse effects of revealing information that relates to studied or disclosed behaviours, for example illegal or sexual behaviour.

Benefits versus harms

A researcher might decide to do some research in their local community looking at people's diets. In doing so they may find that some people eat more of a certain foodstuff, which could put them at greater risk of disease; for example, very sugary food can increase the risk of developing diabetes. The people who agreed to take part in the research might not have wanted to find this out, and being told that they are at risk of disease could be distressing for them. Researchers should consider whether their findings could have a negative impact, and if so, whether that impact is acceptable given the benefits they expect to see.

If there is a possibility that research, either its methods or its results, could harm those who take part, the environment or others, the researcher must think carefully about whether they should continue. This will depend on the seriousness of the risk – how likely it is and how severe the harm – and how this risk balances against the possible benefits. Personal benefits to the researcher should not form part of a risk-benefit calculation. However, minor the harm might be, researchers must make every effort to reduce it or remove it completely.

Choosing participants

It is unethical to choose participants from one particular social group, unless the research is specifically about that group. For example, if the research is about the smoking habits of people in a particular town, then it is obviously fair to recruit from that town. However, it would not be ethical to recruit only people of

Bangladeshi descent from that town, or only women. If the research is about a very specific social group then that choice must be justified. Such justifications might include a pressing health concern in a particular group that needs addressing, or a unique or rare characteristic in a group that would be important to study.

Are the harms and benefits of your research shared fairly between the participants?

Ideally, the risks and benefits of taking part in research should be distributed equally among participants, regardless of social group. For example, a study that explores whether paying people helps them to stop smoking might divide participants into two groups: one group that is paid, another that is not. If the participants are put in these groups randomly, that would be ethical. However, if the groups were based on ethnicity or gender, with all the payments going to one particular social group, that would be unethical. The same is true of distributing risks, even small ones. A study that explores the effect of running might divide participants into a one group that runs 1 km on a treadmill every day and a group that does not. The risk of running is quite small (people could fall on the treadmill etc.), but it would still be unethical to base the groups on social characteristics such as age or income.

At the end of the project, researchers should reflect on how they planned for and managed the ethical implications of the research. There may have been problems that were not anticipated, or the research may have had an impact that was not predicted. Researchers should record what went well, what was found to be difficult and what they would do differently if the research were to be repeated.

Definition of harm

The University of Wolverhampton is committed to protecting the safety and wellbeing of all those involved with research projects conducted by the University, its staff and/or agents working on its behalf.

This includes events falling within the UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) definition of: *"...any sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment of research participants, communities and research staff, plus any broader forms of violence, exploitation and abuse relevant to research such as bullying, psychological abuse and/or physical violence..."*

Individuals and organisations conducting research need to be alert to the broad range of harm that might arise from research activities and the measures that need to be taken to prevent foreseeable harm, to thoroughly investigate any report of harm caused as a result of research activity, to support those who have come to harm and to take appropriate action against anyone found to have caused harm.

Harm caused by one researcher to another

An example would be: one researcher bullying, harassing or assaulting another. The risk of this could be increased by a lack of support structures or by an imbalance of power.

Harm caused by a researcher to a research participant

In the worst cases this might mean a researcher abusing their position and harassing or taking advantage of a participant. It could mean harm caused by negligence in the conduct of research, such as insensitive questioning regarding a traumatic subject, or in the handling of information, such as carelessly revealing someone's participation in a study regarding a personal subject, or by partial deception or incomplete disclosure that may not be sufficiently justified and explained to participants in the debrief, where a participant may feel they took part and provided responses under false pretences.

Harm caused by a research project, or those involved with it, to a community

A community could be any group bound by a variety of things, such as location, beliefs, a common experience, a shared interest or self-identity, etc. Harm might be caused by an insensitive approach and/or lack of follow-up, particularly with frequently researched groups, leading to a sense of de-humanisation; or by asking individuals to speak for the whole, without a general consensus, potentially leading to division, fears of misrepresentation or feelings of betrayal.

Harm caused by a research participant to a researcher

In order to maintain confidentiality or to gain a subjects confidence, or simply due to limited resource, it may be necessary for a researcher to meet alone with a research participant, who will likely be a stranger to them. In such circumstances there are risks to the safety and wellbeing of investigators.

Harm suffered by a researcher as a result of the nature of their work

Researchers may be a risk of physical harm if research requires that they travel to dangerous environments. Researchers may also be at risk of psychological harm, or secondary trauma, when investigating traumatic or disturbing subjects. Mitigation needs to be considered in research design and conduct, to minimise these risks.

Researchers may be put at risk if they are citizens of a country where certain research topics are discouraged or illegal. Researchers and academic supervisors should consider these risks during the design and conduct of projects.

Further guidance

- UKRI Risk and Benefit in research - <https://www.ukri.org/councils/esrc/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics-guidance/risk-and-benefit/>
- UK Collaborative on Development Research (UKCDR) Guidance on Safeguarding in International Development Research - <https://www.ukcdr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/170420-UKCDR-Guidance-for-Safeguarding-in-International-Development-Research.pdf>