by sw587@cam.ac.uk — last modified by nls37@cam.ac.uk Dec 19, 2018.

There are direct ethical issues related to the collection of personal data, such as memories, and more indirect ones related to any kind of social research. In particular, when data and memories refer to war and conflict, social researchers have an overwhelming responsibility to handle carefully and sensitively any information that they uncover or that is entrusted to them. They must be extremely respectful of personal and local sensitivities. The same considerations apply to the presentation and dissemination of research data both at the local level and beyond. In practice informed consent will be sought when collecting personal data, including permission for the use of data; collection of data will be done in a sensitive manner; and confidentiality will always be respected. More broadly all researchers must be aware of the importance of following ethical codes in all data collection and in ensuring that ethical awareness informs all research practice. In particular, all researchers should adhere to a code of ethical research based on that used by the Association of Social Anthropologists (<http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml>) ; for comparison, see the Code of ethics promulgated by the American Anthropological Association (<http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm>) ; in the case of practice-based or design-based research, researchers should take note of the Ethics in Architectural Practice by the Royal Institute of British Architects (<https://www.architecture.com/-/media/gathercontent/un-sustainable-development-goals-in-practice/additional-documents/ethicsinarchitecturalpracticecasestudiespdf.pdf>) .

**Introduction**

Social researchers carry out their professional research in many places around the world; some where they are ‘at home’ and others where they are in some way ‘foreign’. Their scholarship occurs within a variety of economic, cultural, legal and political settings. As professionals and as citizens, they need to consider the effects of their involvement with, and consequences of their work for; the individuals and groups among whom they do their fieldwork (their research participants or ‘subjects’); their colleagues and the discipline, and collaborating researchers; sponsors, funders, employers and gatekeepers; their own and host governments; and other interest groups and the wider society in the countries in which they work.

Social researchers are faced increasingly with competing duties, obligations and conflicts of interest, with the need to make implicit or explicit choices between values and between the interests of different individuals and groups. Ethical and legal dilemmas occur at all stages of research – in the selection of topic, area or population, in negotiating access and during the research itself conducting fieldwork, in the interpretation and analysis of results and in the publication of findings and the disposal of data. Researchers have a responsibility to anticipate problems and insofar as is possible to resolve them without harming the research participants or the scholarly community.

To these ends the Faculty has adopted the following set of ethical guidelines to which individual participants should subscribe. They follow the educational model for professional codes, aiming to alert researchers to issues that raise ethical concerns or to potential problems and conflicts of interests that might arise in the research process. They are intended to provide a practical framework for project

participants to make informed decisions about their own behaviour and involvement, and to help them communicate their professional positions more clearly to the other parties involved in or affected by their research activities.

**1. Relations with and responsibilities towards research participants**

**(1) Protecting research participants and honouring trust**: social researchers should endeavour to protect the physical, social and psychological well-being of those whom they study and to respect their rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy.

**(2) Anticipating harms**: social researchers should be sensitive to the possible consequences of their work and should endeavour to guard against predictably harmful effects. Consent from subjects does not absolve researchers from their obligation to protect research participants as far as possible against the potentially harmful effects of research:

1. The researcher should try to minimise disturbances both to subjects themselves and to the subjects’ relationships with their environment. Even though research participants may be immediately protected by the device of anonymity, the researcher should try to anticipate the long- term effects on individuals or groups as a result of the research;
2. Researchers may sometimes be better placed than (at the least, some of) their informants to anticipate the possible repercussions of their research both for the immediate participants and for other members of the research population or the wider society. In certain political contexts, some groups, for example, religious or ethnic minorities, may be particularly vulnerable and it may be necessary to withhold data from publication or even to refrain from studying them at all.

**(3) Avoiding undue intrusion**: researchers should be aware of the intrusive potential of some of their enquiries and methods:

* 1. Social researchers have no special entitlement to study all phenomena; and the advancement of knowledge and the pursuit of information are not in themselves sufficient justifications for overriding the values and ignoring the interests of those studied;
	2. They should be aware that for research participants becoming the subject of social scientific description and interpretations can be a welcome experience, but it can also be a disturbing one. In many of the social scientific enquiries that have caused controversy this has not arisen because participants have suffered directly or indirectly any actual harm. Rather, the concern has resulted from participants’ feelings of having suffered an intrusion into private and personal domains, or of having been wronged, (for example, by having been caused to acquire self-knowledge which they did not seek or want).

**(4) Negotiating informed consent**: Following the precedent set by the Nuremberg Trials and the constitutional laws of many countries, inquiries involving human subjects should be based on the freely given informed consent of subjects. The principle of informed consent expresses the belief in the need for truthful and respectful exchanges between social researchers and the people whom they study.

* 1. Negotiating consent entails communicating information likely to be material to a person’s willingness to participate, such as: – the purpose(s) of the study, and the anticipated consequences of the research; the identity of funders and sponsors; the anticipated uses of the data; possible benefits of the study and possible harm or discomfort that might affect participants; issues relating to data storage and security; and the degree of anonymity and confidentiality which may be afforded to informants and subjects.
	2. Consent in research is a process, not a one-off event, and may require renegotiation over time.
	3. When technical data-gathering devices such as audio/visual-recorders and photographic records are being used those studied should be made aware of the capacities of such devices and be free to reject their use.
	4. When information is being collected from proxies, care should be taken not to infringe the ‘private space’ of the subject or the relationship between subject and proxy; and if there are indications that the person concerned would object to certain information being disclosed, such information should not be sought by proxy;
	5. The long period over which researchers make use of their data and the possibility that unforeseen uses or theoretical interests may arise in the future may need to be conveyed to participants, as should any likelihood that the data may be shared (in some form) with other colleagues or be made available to sponsors, funders or other interested parties, or deposited in archives.

**(5) Rights to confidentiality and anonymity**: informants and other research participants should have the right to remain anonymous and to have their rights to privacy and confidentiality respected:

* 1. Care should be taken not to infringe uninvited upon the ‘private space’ (as locally defined) of an individual or group;
	2. As far as is possible researchers should anticipate potential threats to confidentiality and anonymity. They should consider whether it is necessary to even a matter of propriety to record certain information at all; should take appropriate measures relating to the storage and security of records during and after fieldwork; and should use where appropriate such means as the removal of identifiers, the use of pseudonyms and other technical solutions to the problems of privacy in field records and in oral and written forms of data dissemination (whether or not this is enjoined by law or administrative regulation);
	3. Researchers should endeavour to anticipate problems likely to compromise anonymity; but they should make clear to participants that it may not be possible in field notes and other records or publications totally to conceal identities, and that the anonymity afforded or promised to individuals, families or other groups may also be unintentionally compromised. A particular configuration of attributes can frequently identify an individual beyond reasonable doubt; and it is particularly difficult to disguise, say, office-holders, organizations, public agencies, ethnic groups, religious denominations or other collectivities without so distorting the data as to compromise scholarly accuracy and integrity;
	4. If guarantees of privacy and confidentiality are made, they must be honoured unless they are clear and over-riding ethical reasons not to do so. Confidential information must be treated as such by the researcher even when it enjoys no legal protection or privilege, and other people who have access to the data should be made aware of their obligations likewise; but participants should be made aware that it is rarely, if at all, legally possible to ensure total confidentiality or to protect the privacy of records.

**2. Responsibilities to the Wider Society**

Researchers also have responsibilities towards other members of the public and wider society. They depend upon the confidence of the public and they should in their work attempt to promote and preserve such confidence without exaggerating the accuracy or explanatory power of their findings.

**(1) Considering conflicting interests**: Social inquiry is predicated on the belief that greater access to well-founded information will serve rather than threaten the interests of society:

* 1. Nonetheless, in planning all phases of an inquiry, from design to presentation of findings, social researchers should also consider the likely consequences for the wider society, groups within it, and possible future research, as well as for members of the research population not directly involved in the study and the immediate research participants;
	2. That information can be misconstrued or misused is not in itself a convincing argument against its collection and dissemination. All information is subject to misuse; and no information is devoid of possible harm to one interest or another. Individuals may be harmed by their participation in social inquiries, or group interests may be harmed by certain findings. Researchers are usually not in a position to prevent action based on their findings; but they should, however, attempt to preempt likely misinterpretations and to counteract them when they occur.