

# IREC Principles of Ethical Research



## **The seven principles**

The Independent Research Ethics Committee (IREC) is guided by the seven principles of intersectionality, justice, dignity, respect, fairness, honesty, and care ("the seven principles"). We expect IREC applicants to demonstrate their understanding of the seven principles in their application, and it should be clear that the seven principles are embedded throughout the proposed research.

## **Intersectionality**

We understand "intersectionality" to represent the distinct experiences and expressions that emerge for those who face multiple forms of discrimination and/or marginalisation. IREC considers the ethical dimensions of all phases of a research project. We begin with inception, asking questions such as: Is the research question ethical? Is the research project alive to intersectionality? Could the findings be misused? We look for evidence of explicit consideration of intersecting ethical concerns as we work through an application: positionality and representation among the research team, awareness of and sensitivity to the ethical impacts of intersecting identities and experiences of oppression within the research itself and the research context. We end with aftercare: for participants, data, and findings, and how these intersect. IREC considers the wellbeing of researchers and others, such as gatekeepers, as well as the wellbeing of participants, and is aware of potential intersections here too.

## **Justice**

While IREC expects every research project to demonstrate compliance with relevant laws and regulations, we recognise that minimum legal compliance and research ethics are different, and at times may even be in tension, where compliance with legal requirements gives rise to ethical consideration for researchers, participants, or other interested people. Ethics in other fields, such as journalism, technology, and medicine, are different again and multiple dimensions of ethical considerations may be relevant for a particular research project. For example, if a proposal is for research into the use of artificial intelligence to support a medical procedure, that proposal should demonstrate understanding of the relationships and divisions between research ethics, the ethics of technology, and medical ethics alongside data protection and medical research legal requirements.

Where the standards in any field are lower than the requirements of research ethics, then research ethics should take precedence. For example, it is legal in many countries for researchers to use as data anything that is publicly available online. However, many users of social media are not happy for researchers to redefine their posts and use them as data. Therefore, in social media research, the requirements of informed consent and accountability should take precedence over legal requirements.

## **Dignity**

We believe that the dignity of research participants is an important ethical issue to consider throughout the research process. Research should be designed, carried out and disseminated in ways that do not compromise the dignity of research participants. Dignity should be understood in context. For example, the concept of dignity in Western cultures is founded on the rights of the individual, whereas in many African cultures dignity is understood as existing in relationships with others (in terms of, for example, diminishing or increasing the standing of a person relative to others). Dignity can mean ensuring that participants are not demeaned or reduced in the research process. It can also mean making sure that participants benefit from research, and they are not merely being used to serve others' interests. The concept of dignity is closely related to the principles of respect and care. Embracing a research ethics based on respect, care, and a desire to act in ways that benefit participants can help to ensure that participants' dignity is protected and promoted in the research process.

Where an ethical dilemma is caused by competing rights, we will prioritise and support people's autonomy in order to help protect their dignity. We will not support any attempt to exercise power over other people's autonomy because that could compromise those people's dignity.

## **Respect**

We believe that participants should be involved and informed throughout the research process. We expect researchers to check their findings with participants before publication, unless there are good reasons why this should not or cannot be done. Published findings should be shared with participants in a format that is accessible and understandable to them.

We support peer-led and co-research approaches where peers and co-researchers are genuinely and meaningfully involved in research and, therefore, suitably rewarded for their time and skills using pay or other appropriate means (more on this below).

## **Fairness**

We believe research should only be carried out where there is clear evidence of need. Research involves asking people to disclose – often sensitive – information about their lives, which they should not be asked to do without a valid justification. We recognise that some communities are over-researched and so we will not support projects which involve duplication of existing research. We believe that researchers should ask ourselves: am I using my power as ethically as possible?

We further believe that primary data should only be gathered where there is clear evidence of need. We recommend, wherever possible, starting with the use of secondary data through re-analysis, or existing research through systematic review. This acknowledges the worth of existing data/research and reduces research fatigue.

While we recognise students often need to conduct empirical research in order to fulfil the requirements of their degree, we will only support projects that have a clear practical value and do not duplicate existing work.

## **Honesty**

We believe that researchers should maintain the highest standards of confidentiality. This means thinking carefully about how information is recorded, transported and stored. Personal data should be collected and stored in accordance with GDPR.

Confidentiality should only be broken if a participant discloses that they, or another person, are at immediate or significant risk of harm. If safe and appropriate to do so, the researcher should tell the participant that they intend to break confidentiality and their reason for doing this.

Unless the participant or another person is at immediate or significant risk of harm, we do not believe researchers should disclose illegal activity, if told about this in the course of carrying out research. An exception to this would be cases where there is a legal obligation to report specific types of illegal activity, such as terrorism and money laundering. Further guidance on such cases is available [here](#).

Anonymity should be carefully considered. There is a good ethical argument for naming participants who wish to be named. Where anonymity is preferred, researchers should rigorously anonymise research outputs. This goes beyond removing names and other identifying details to considering whether quotes or extracts are included verbatim. They should certainly not be if gathered from social media. Also, within small communities, a description of a particular experience or viewpoint could be sufficient to identify someone. Therefore researchers need carefully to consider how they will protect anonymity where anonymity is required.

## **Care**

We believe researchers should ensure that they are accountable to their participants and other people connected with the research. This means being clear about why the research is taking place, what the expected impact of the research is, and the associated timescales. It also means ensuring that participants and other interested people know who is funding and managing the research, as well as who they can complain to about the research. We believe that researchers should ask ourselves: am I using my power as carefully as possible?

Researchers should keep in contact with participants and other people connected with the research, to update them on the research throughout the process. The frequency with which this should take place will depend on the individual project.

We believe that research should be mutually beneficial to both researchers and participants. While we recognise the positive impact of research in driving change in policy and practice, this is often a long-term process and is unlikely to immediately benefit participants. We therefore expect participants to directly benefit in some way from the research process. Ideally, this should involve reimbursing participants and, as a minimum,

we would expect participants in the UK to receive an amount based on the current Real Living Wage rate. Ideally, this should involve reimbursing participants in cash, as we do not believe it is the position of researchers to judge or regulate how participants spend money.

If it is not possible to provide financial reimbursement, researchers should provide reimbursement in-kind, for example, providing participants with practical assistance to access services such as transport or the internet, or to meet other needs.