Guidelines to help you think ethically

The purpose of this document is to help student researchers in the Department of Applied Human Sciences to think ethically about their research projects. Before starting a research project the student researcher is required to complete and receive their TCPS2 core certification. For additional information concerning Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans please refer to the Tri-Council Policy statement.

Many of the ethical issues described here seem straightforward if we simply reverse positions with the people who are participating in our project. Instead of remaining in your role, think about what it would be like to be a human participant in your project. What kinds of worries would you have and how would you like them to be addressed?

Generally, the following ethical principles should be considered as you design your project and work with participants:

- Respect for Human Dignity

- Respect for Free and Informed Consent

- Respect for Vulnerable Persons

- Respect for Privacy and Confidentiality

- Respect for Justice and Inclusiveness

- Balancing Risks and Benefits-- Minimizing Harm; Maximizing Benefit

CONFIDENTIALITY

The people participating in your project should be guaranteed confidentiality to the greatest extent possible. This means that if possible, nobody should know who is participating and who is not participating in your project. It also means that people should not be able to identify the participants who provided specific examples of the data that you have collected. To protect the confidentiality of participants, your notes and other sensitive material should be kept in a secure place and be destroyed after the required period of time.

Participants should be informed of any limitations to your ability to guarantee confidentiality.

There are a few exceptions to the general rule about confidentiality. For example, you may need to disclose participant identities if you discover that there are children who may be at risk, or if you encounter adults who are threatening to harm themselves or others. If you encounter an exceptional situation such as this, you should immediately contact your course instructor.

When you discuss your project with classmates, instructors, or others – whether in informal conversations, presentations, or written materials – you must protect the identities of individual participants and the reputation of the organization.

Key questions for thinking ethically about confidentiality

- How are you going to keep the identities of your participants and/or organizations confidential?

- Who will you go to if there is a case of a child or adult at risk, and you need to report this?

- Within the group of people who are participating in your project, how will you keep the information discussed in the group confidential?

COERCION

No one should be coerced or forced to participate in your project. If participants are "assigned" to attend the group [e.g. children or the elderly], they have a right to choose how they participate (which includes choosing to be passive and quiet during activities). In some cases it may be possible to provide people with an alternative activity, if that is their choice.

Every potential participant in your project must be given the opportunity to decline to participate in your project, or in any portion of your project, or in any activity that is part of the project.

Key questions for thinking ethically about coercion

- How will you contact and recruit participants?

- How will you guard against feelings of coercion or pressure from an organizational leader who asks or tells participants to participate in your project?

- How will you make sure that the supervisors / teachers / those with power over your participants do not exert any pressure on them to participate?

- How will you make it clear to everyone that participants can participate at their level of comfort?

- Can you provide an alternate activity or an alternate way to participate for those who are reluctant?

INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION

Will participants for your project be selected from a large group of people, so that some people are included in the research and others are excluded? If this is the case, some ethical issues must be considered. For example, those who are excluded may feel that they have been rejected or negatively evaluated. On the other hand, those who are included may worry that their selection is because they are "problematic" in some way. Random selection (with everyone knowing that selection has been carried out randomly) is often an appropriate solution to these sorts of problems.

Key questions for thinking ethically about inclusion and exclusion

- Might it be necessary to exclude some potential participants from your project?

- Have you described your random selection process clearly in your recruitment materials, and in your consent forms?

CONSENT

Institutions and people need to consent to participate in a student research project.

If your project is taking place in an organization, then an organizational leader needs to provide written consent for the organization to participate. This written consent is provided by signing a written institutional consent form.

Individual participants in your project must also provide informed consent to participate. This is provided by signing a participant consent form.

To create your consent forms, you must use the samples that are available on the department web site.

Key questions for thinking ethically about consent

- Does your consent form describe the project purpose, and describe all activities that people are expected to participate in?

- Does your consent form identify you as a Concordia University student doing an assignment for a specific course and provide the name of your instructor or supervisor (including contact information)?

- Does your consent form make it clear that participants have the right to withdraw at any time? Does the form make it clear that participants may tailor their level of participation to their own comfort level? Do you provide alternate activities for those who may be "forced" to attend by the organization?

- Do you explain to the participants how the data you collect will be used and with whom the data is shared?

- If your research project was approved by both your course instructor and the department ethics committee, does your consent form contain the name of the chair of the ethics committee (including contact information)?

CARE (FOR THE PEOPLE INVOLVED)

Student researchers must pay attention to participants situations and needs. You must consider how your project might affect participants, and you must have empathy towards your participants. You have a responsibility to think before you act, since each action has an impact. Students must give thought to the possibility that some of their project activities could result in participants experiencing troubling thoughts or embarrassment.

Key questions about caring for your participants

- Have you thought carefully about the physical, psychological, or reputational risks that could be triggered by your project activities? Have you thought of ways to eliminate or minimize these risks?

- What will you do if someone experiences distress because of participating in your project? What resources could you call upon?

- Are you going to ask any personal questions or potentially embarrassing questions? Are these necessary? Do you make it clear that participants do not need to answer any questions unless they want to?

SHARING RESULTS

The people who participate in your research project have freely given their information (data) and their time. It is therefore important to give them access to the results of your research / data-gathering. In presenting results, you must make sure that you do not expose individuals to potentially harmful or uncomfortable situations (for example, by making it obvious that a specific person provided certain data). This is best handled by presenting your results in terms of general trends, patterns, themes, or tendencies, which accurately represent the views expressed.

Key questions about sharing results

- What is the best way to share results with your participants? Will they prefer to have you make a short presentation, or will they prefer to receive a brief written report?