

Key Concepts in Research Ethics

It is now generally agreed that research on human subjects must meet basic ethical standards and that all new research proposals involving human subjects should be submitted to an ethical review process. The need for such review, and its rigour, is primarily determined by the potential risks to participants. Most of the research which has traditionally been carried out in the three disciplines represented in the School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences does not appear of itself to carry a high level of risk for participants.

In general, for example, it does not seem likely that the kind of linguistic or speech data collected (e.g. grammaticality judgments, memory for word lists), are of a sensitive or private nature; that participants would be embarrassed by other people knowing about such information; or that the method of collecting data is stressful for the participant. But other work (e.g. on language attitudes or on the communication difficulties of limited English speakers) is potentially more sensitive.

In addition, the fact that vulnerable groups such as children or clinical populations are often involved in our research increases the potential range of ethical issues to which particular projects may give rise. The basic tenets of ethical research are that a researcher should respect the people who provide the data (for example, their right to privacy), and to avoid doing them any harm in the process of collecting, analysing and publishing data (for example, causing any disruptions or stress).

Risk to participants and vulnerable populations

The key issue to be assessed by the Research Ethics Committee (REC) is whether any risk, discomfort, stress or embarrassment to participants is posed by the proposed research. Where some of these negative factors are unavoidable, the researcher will be expected to show that everything possible has been done to minimise the risk or discomfort for participants. In particular, evidence will be sought that participants from vulnerable populations (e.g. children, medical patients) have been adequately protected. In addition, the REC will consider if participants have been made fully aware of any potential risks or discomforts in advance, so that they can make an informed judgment about whether they want to participate or not.

Other related issues are whether written consent was obtained, whether subjects have been informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, and how issues of confidentiality are to be handled by the researcher. The REC will require a greater degree of detail about research procedures from applicants, and will apply more rigorous standards to matters such as consent, in the case of participants from vulnerable populations.

Sometimes, researchers may need to take special care in the manner in which they ask individuals to participate in their research, perhaps because they are dealing with a vulnerable population, or in a setting where individuals may feel under undue pressure to participate in the proposed project (i.e. if the researcher has a close professional or personal relationship with the sample population). In these cases, a gatekeeper is often used as a buffer between researcher and participants, (e.g. school principal, programme coordinator).

Informed Consent

Informed consent is consent that is granted in the knowledge of the possible consequences; in other words, participants should have a clear idea of what they are agreeing to. Permission must be obtained from anybody who provides data for the research project. Normally participants should read a description of the study and their part in it, including an enumeration of potential risks and benefits. Participants should be told they are free to withdraw from the study at any time, irrespective of the reason, without any negative consequences for them. They should then sign an Informed Consent Form (template provided on the School Research Ethics webpage) signalling their agreement to participate. In some types of research, spoken consent may be obtained and recorded at the beginning of an interview. Of course, people have the right to refuse to take part in the proposed research, and do not have to specify any particular reason for this. In some situations, the consent form can be given to participants at least three days and up to seven days before they sign it so that they have time to reflect on the information and to make a free choice about whether they want to participate or not.

Participation Information Leaflet

The Participant Information Leaflet (PIL) (template provided on the School Research Ethics webpage) accompanies the Informed Consent Form, and is designed to provide people with information about your research project. In some research projects, it is recommended that you provide participants with enough time to think over whether they would like to participate or not before signing the consent form. This depends on some practical details of how often you can meet with participants, but it is standard practice in some research methodologies (e.g. experimental research) to allow participants at least three days and up to seven days to reflect before asking them for their consent.

Templates

The School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences provides templates for Participant Information Leaflets and Consent Forms on the Research Ethics website. However, applicants should carefully adapt these templates according to their project

design, and should also ensure that the description of the research project is tailored to the profile of their sample population, through, for example, providing child-friendly formatting and avoiding jargon when describing research.

Consent and assent

Researchers must consider whether participants are competent to give consent and free to give it. In the case of children (anyone under the age of 18), the consent of parents/carers must be obtained and, if possible and appropriate, the children's assent should also be sought. Legally, children under 18 cannot provide consent as they are minors, therefore their parents or legal guardians must give consent on their behalf. However, children can agree to participate in research, and this agreement is described as assent.

Recordings of people's speech (e.g. for phonetic analysis or in the context of building a corpus) should only be made if they have first agreed to be recorded and understand that the recording will be used in specified ways. If a researcher desires to use an existing recording for a substantially new purpose not specified in the original consent, permission for this new use may be necessary, where practical. Clearly, the need for consent, or indeed ethical approval, does not arise in the case of recordings of people speaking on radio or television.

Confidentiality and anonymity

If you have not obtained permission to identify the participants in your research, great care must be taken that information about them which is stored in textual form, or audio/video recordings, does not inadvertently allow them to be recognized. It also means protecting access to data on your computer or in your files. Confidentiality means that you, as researcher, are aware of the participants' true identities, identities which you must take every care to protect; anonymity is when you do not know the identities (names) of the individuals who have participated in your research (e.g., gathering data through use of an anonymous questionnaire). If you obtain the names of individuals (for instance, by asking them to sign their names), it is no longer an anonymous study.

The Informed Consent Form is used to assure participants that personal or identification data will be kept confidential and that only aggregated results will be published, or indeed, to obtain their permission to identify them by name or by other characteristics (e.g. age, nationality). The kind of confidentiality which is guaranteed in qualitative studies must be clearly specified, however, since participants can be identified by the kinds of things they say.

Participants should be told in advance exactly how the data they provide will be used. If audio recordings are stored, participants must be informed of potential future uses for

the data in research and teaching contexts, and their agreement to this must be explicitly obtained. The research ethics review process will consider not just the nature of the assurances given to participants but also the practical steps taken by researchers to honour these commitments.