

Six Key Principles of Research

There are six key principles of ethical research that the European Social and Research Council (ESRC) expects to be addressed, whenever applicable:

- Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure integrity and quality.
- Research staff and subjects must be informed fully about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation in the research entails and what risks, if any, are involved. Some variation is allowed in very specific and exceptional research contexts for which detailed guidance is provided in the policy Guidelines.
- The confidentiality of information supplied by research subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.
- Research participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from any coercion.
- Harm to research participants must be avoided.
- The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

To implement these principles:

- The responsibility for the conduct of the research in line with relevant principles rests with the principal investigator.
- The responsibility for ensuring that research is subject to appropriate ethical review, approval and monitoring lies with the institution seeking or holding an award with the ESRC and which employs the researchers performing it, or some of the researchers when it is acting as the co-ordinator for collaborative research involving more than one organisation. Institutions should have clear, transparent, appropriate and effective procedures in place for ethical approval whenever it is necessary. Ethical review should always be proportionate to the potential risk, whether this involves primary or secondary data. Whilst the secondary use of some datasets may be relatively uncontroversial, and require only expedited ethical review, novel use of existing data and especially data linkage may, in some contexts, raise ethical issues. Research involving primary data collection will always raise ethical issues that must be addressed.
- Breaches of good ethical practice in ESRC-funded research will be treated as a very serious matter by the Council. They could result in the immediate suspension of the individual project and other projects based at or under the coordination of the contracting institution, and a halt to the consideration of further applications from that institution.

Summary

- Researchers and research organisations should ensure that appropriate governance procedures and mechanisms are in place to oversee social science research.
- The ethical principles of integrity, honesty, confidentiality, voluntary participation, impartiality and the avoidance of personal risk to individuals or social groups characterise social science research that is conducted in a professional and ethical manner.
- The key concept of informed consent needs to be understood by both researchers and the RECs in light of the context, aims and objectives of the research and may require ongoing review and advice from fellow professionals or a REC itself.