

Ethical Guidelines for Research in Library and Information Studies

LIANZA Research-SIG

What are the Guidelines for?

Most research completed in library and information studies (LIS) involves human subjects so it is important that researchers in this area are aware of the ethical issues that can arise. These guidelines are written with the intention of first, describing the most likely but not all ethical issues that will be encountered in LIS research done by practitioners and second, suggesting ways of avoiding or ameliorating the ethical problems that can arise when conducting research with human subjects.

Who should use these Guidelines?

For those researchers working in an organisation that has an ethics approval process, such as a tertiary institution, they must go through the required procedure in that institution. If the research is to be done with vulnerable subjects and there is an ethics approval process in a relevant body then again, the researcher should work within that framework.

The guidance provided here is only relevant for those working in libraries or conducting research in and around a library that has no ethical approval process (e.g. a typical public library) and when no other organisation can provide relevant ethical guidance. LIANZA does not provide an ethics approval process and only offers these guidelines as a framework to help the researcher think through relevant issues; even if no other guidance is available it remains the responsibility of the researcher to conduct the research in an ethical way.

What types of research does this cover?

There are basic ethical principles that will apply to many LIS research projects involving human subjects and some are described in these guidelines. The reader should note that ethical standards are distinct from legal requirements, and that ethical standards change over time.

In this document a distinction is made between anonymous research and confidential research:

- Anonymous research means that the identity of participants is not known to anyone involved in the research and it is not possible for the researcher(s) to identify who took part in the research project or subsequently identify them. Typically this sort of research is done with a survey.
- Confidential research means that some party involved in the research is able to identify the participants but identities are not revealed to anyone other than those people involved in the research. The researcher(s) should take reasonable precautions to ensure participants' identities cannot be linked to responses made public in reports, presentations and publications. Typically this sort of research is done using interviews or focus groups.

Ethical Considerations for the Researcher to think about

1. Participant recruitment

Recruitment of participants should be voluntary and not involve coercion. Refusal to participate does not require a justification.

- Some small incentive is acceptable. A voucher for \$50 or less can be offered to one lucky participant in an anonymous survey (there are ways to collect contact details without prejudicing the anonymity of responses). In focus groups it is common to offer beverages and biscuits.
- It is particularly important to ensure there is no coercion if research is done within a single organisation in which the researcher is a staff member.

Privacy

If contact details of potential participants are taken from a secondary source, such as a membership database, the researcher must ensure that he/she has the right to use the personal details for the purpose of research. If that is not the case then sometimes it is necessary to use an intermediary to contact potential participants.

2. The avoidance of harm

LIS research rarely involves potential physical harm but there is a potential for other kinds of harm that the researcher has a duty to avoid. Factual information of a sensitive nature (e.g. disability or illness, relationships, personal income, drug taking, illegal activity, etc.) should only be collected if the participant is fully aware of how it will be used and is willing to provide full consent. Asking participants about certain incidents might trigger emotional distress or severe embarrassment and this too should be avoided. Research that involves deception should be avoided in almost all circumstances. A basic principle can be applied to all research that can cause distress or harm; that the project benefits must outweigh the potential hazards in the project, and in LIS research that test will very rarely be met.

3. Full information

Sufficient information should be provided to potential participants so that they can make an informed decision whether to agree to provide data or not.

- This will typically be given in an Information Sheet, though if data collection is by an online survey the information can be put in an email message that is sent to potential respondents asking for participation.

Information Sheets typically include:

- The title of the project and a brief description of the research project and its benefits.
- Information about the participant's voluntary involvement.
- That whānau or a support person may be present at an interview.
- The data that will be collected, how will it be collected, and how long will it take.
- A brief explanation about the aspects of anonymity / confidentiality / attribution / identifiability that apply to both research data collection and reporting in terms of the data, the people, and any organisations involved.
- That withdrawal is possible without having to give reasons by sending an e-mail message to [your email address] by [a specific date], and that data provided by the participant up to that time will be destroyed.

- If interview transcripts are provided, say that the participant will have an opportunity to review the transcripts for accuracy.
- An explanation how the collected data will be stored and secured, and when it will be destroyed.
- An indication of what will happen to the research report and whether publications in journals/conferences may occur.
- The feedback that will be provided (e.g. a summary of the research results) including how and when.
- The name and contact details (both telephone and email) of the researcher(s) involved.

4. Informed consent

Willingness to participate must be clearly established and documented. This is commonly done by providing a Consent Form that the participant will sign. The researcher(s) should keep the Consent Form for (roughly) two years after the completion of the project. Consent Forms typically include:

The title of the project

Statements such as

- I have been given and have understood an explanation of this research project. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself and any information I have provided from this project, without having to give reasons.
- I understand that any information I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher(s), the published results will not use my name, and that no opinions will be attributed to me in any way that will identify me.

[Where relevant, a statement about the confidentiality of the organisation will need to be added.]

- I understand that the data I provide will not be used for any other purpose or released to others.
- I understand that, if this interview is audio recorded, the recording and transcripts of the interviews will be erased [x] years after the conclusion of the project. Furthermore, I will have an opportunity to check a transcript of the interview.

Please indicate (by ticking the boxes below) which of the following apply:

- I would like to receive a summary of the results of this research when it is completed.
- I agree to this interview being audio recorded.

Contact details of the researcher(s).

Name of the participant, signature and date.

Research conducted within one organisation or within a small group opens up the possibility that comments made by participants could lead to them being identified by others. While this does not prevent the research being conducted, it makes it very important that participants understand the possibility of being identified and that their consent should only be given with that understanding. An extra statement can be added to the Consent Form to allow for this:

I understand that the organisation(s) in the research may be identifiable.

In such cases, the researcher should ensure that a senior representative of the organisation has consented to the organisation and its staff participating, and that this is done in the awareness that

the organisation is either named or is likely to be identified. A separate consent form is advisable so that organisational consent is documented.

Participation in an anonymous survey does not require documentation. Usually a statement seen by the participant that says "Completion of the survey is taken as giving informed consent" is sufficient.

Withdrawal from the research

A participant should be allowed to withdraw from the research without giving a reason, and if they do then all data he/she has provided must be deleted. This is possible with individual interviews but impossible for anonymous surveys and focus groups. It is common to set a time limit to this, such as four weeks after the interview, or prior to the commencement of data analysis.

Storage of the data

There are several reasons why research data should be stored for some time after the closure of the project. There is no specific time that data should be kept but two years is common. Data should always be stored securely.

5. Special care of potentially vulnerable participants

By the nature of library work, LIS researchers might wish to conduct research with particular groups. Special care must be taken with vulnerable groups: young people, people with mental health issues, people with learning disabilities, the socially disadvantaged, prisoners, etc. Because participants should be able to give their informed consent to participate, the research(s) must either be able to communicate information about the project to potential participants or should partner with somebody who can.

- For some groups there are ethics committees that are best placed to consider the proposed research, e.g. the Health and Disability Ethics Committees (<http://ethics.health.govt.nz/>) and the researcher is strongly advised to contact them.
- In the case of research with children under the age of 16 there should be an Information Sheet and Consent Form for the parent/guardian. Children should be informed in appropriate ways about any research they are invited to participate in; their continued willingness to participate should be checked for at all stages in the project. If the research is conducted within a school then the Principal should be given an Information Sheet and asked to sign a suitable Consent Form.

6. Research involving Māori participants

The researcher(s) should be fully aware of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

- Where research involves or includes Māori, researchers should work with hapū, iwi and other Māori communities in designing the research. Where appropriate researchers should consult with local tangata whenua and be aware of relevant tikanga and kawa.
- Researcher(s) should protect individual and collective Māori rights, especially in relation to cultural and intellectual property
- If the project involves Māori participants, Māori should be involved in the design, management and outcomes of the research, and their contribution duly recognised.

7. Feedback

There are usually two kinds of feedback. One is to ensure the participant is aware what data he/she has provided; this gives the participant an opportunity to alter or remove data that is potentially embarrassing or can be seen to be false or misleading. The other is to give the participants a summary of the outcomes of the research, for without them the project could not have been done.

- After an interview it is common to provide the interviewee with a transcript or at least a summary of what he/she said. This should be done as soon as possible after the interview. The participant should be given the right to change or remove comments, facts, etc. It can be seen that this is actually beneficial to the research as a whole.
- It is common to offer a summary of the final research report to interviewees or members of focus groups. This can be done by collecting contact details on the Consent Form, or by other means.

Brief guidelines such as this document cannot cover every potential ethical issue that could arise in a research project. It is the responsibility of the researcher(s) to identify and cope with all ethical issues that might be involved in a research project that could include protection of the natural environment, care of cultural and social treasures, personal property and intellectual property – this list is not comprehensive but it is intended to illustrate the range of ethical issues that might arise and be dealt with in a reasonable way. At all times the researcher(s) should think of asking for advice from experienced researchers and/or those who have knowledge of research ethics.

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