



# Ethics

**Doing Political Research**

# My Recent Experience: A Funding Application

- Research question: How do migration and remittances affect experiences and perceptions of corruption in Mexico?
- Methods
  - Representative survey of residents of the 10 municipalities in Mexico with the highest migration rates
  - Questions on perceptions of corruption eg in the police, health service, education
  - List experiment to find out which groups were more likely to have paid bribes for public services



# The Response

“Whilst the panel found this application interesting, they did not feel it could be supported because they were unable to satisfy themselves from a due diligence perspective that the vulnerable population who would be the participants in the research would not be put at increased risk as a consequence of their involvement in the research.”



# ESRC: Six Principles of Ethical Research

1. Research should be designed, reviewed and undertaken to ensure **integrity and quality**.
2. 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.
3. The **confidentiality** of information supplied by research subjects and the **anonymity** of respondents must be respected.
4. Research participants must participate in a **voluntary** way, free from any coercion.
5. **Harm** to research participants must be avoided.
6. The **independence** of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.





# Ethical Standards

Costs and Benefits

Informed Consent

Privacy, Confidentiality, and Anonymity

Vulnerable Groups

# Costs and Benefits

---

- There is never zero cost and risk to participants
  - Time costs
  - Seemingly innocuous survey or interview questions could trigger negative emotional responses
- Bigger risks (eg reporting of illegal behaviours) require more careful consideration
- Balance of costs and benefits
- Risks should be mitigated as much as possible





# Informed Consent

---

- A description of the study should be provided to participants in advance, describing
  - the purpose of the research
  - the expected duration
  - what is involved
  - their right to decline to participate and to withdraw from the research once participation has begun
- Participants must actively consent
- If participants are informed *after* taking part, there should be a very good reason for doing so eg audit experiments

# Privacy, Anonymity, Confidentiality



- Personal information given by the subject should be confidential
- Wherever possible, the researcher should take steps to ensure the anonymity of the subjects
- Data Protection Act



# Vulnerable Groups

---

- Special care must be taken with vulnerable groups to ensure ethical treatment (eg children, prisoners, people with mental health issues)
- Gatekeepers (eg schools, prisons)



# Ethical Clashes and Political Research

- Who is this research for? - the participants? the funding body? the wider public? knowledge for its own sake?
- Should participants be involved in shaping the project?
- What if our obligations to the sponsors clash with our obligation to disseminate the results?
- Who should be protected when findings are made public?
- Does the ethical principle of privacy clash with the integrity principle of research transparency?
- How do we deal with on-the-spot ethical decisions that we haven't planned for?
- **There are no simple answers**





# Ethics at Birkbeck


- All student and staff research projects involving human participants or sensitive research materials need to apply for ethical approval
- Routine research projects are approved by Departmental Research Ethics Officers
- Non-routine research (sensitive or extremely sensitive) handled by School/College Ethics Committees
  - Participants' physical or mental wellbeing is put at risk
  - Vulnerable populations are involved
  - Permission of a gatekeeper is required to access participants
  - Use of deception or lack of informed consent
  - Predictable media interest or sensitivity
  - Conflicts of interest





# Conclusion

A thick yellow horizontal bar spans the width of the slide, with a vertical yellow bar extending downwards from its right end.

- Ethical issues need to be considered from the very beginning of designing a research project right through to dissemination of the findings
  - Some issues are easy to deal with; for others, careful reflection is needed
  - Ethical principles can clash with each other
- 
- A thin grey horizontal bar spans the width of the slide at the bottom.