



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

- 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