CODE of CONDUCT for ETHICAL FIELDWORK

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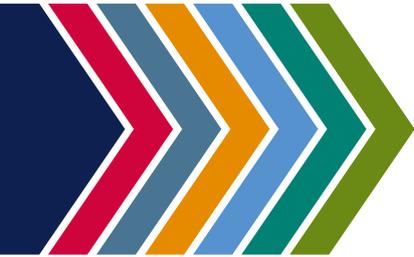
CODE OF CONDUCT FOR ETHICAL FIELDWORK

This guide provides principles and questions to help researchers improve equity in their fieldwork. It prompts reflection and conversation on better practice beyond institutional ethics review processes.

The Code addresses a wide range of ethical issues that can arise through interactions with people during fieldwork, regardless of the type of research being conducted. It is relevant across geographies, methodologies, disciplines, researcher experience levels and project scales.

Researchers are encouraged to work with their project partners and field teams to adapt the Code to their specific fieldwork context. We recognise that research often takes place under tight time and/or funding constraints, and researchers should do what they can within these limitations. We encourage experienced researchers and those with large research projects and budgets to be particularly ambitious.

The Code can be incorporated into early planning stages and then implemented throughout the research process: before, during and after fieldwork. It is not a mandatory part of any formal ethics review process.

More information and references can be found in the Supplementary Toolkit.

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1 SETTING RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

Research should aim to have **positive outcomes**

Field research should aim to be **relevant and reflect local needs,** whilst recognising that groups often have differing views

Where appropriate, research should principally **benefit local communities** and participants involved in the fieldwork

Researchers must consider the **short- and long-term effects** of their planned research

Researchers must **not overstate the benefits** that may accrue as a result of the fieldwork

Where appropriate, **local communities and research partners should be given opportunities** to provide input on all project stages, including funding applications and setting research questions

Fieldwork must comply with all relevant local, national and international laws, including **permitting procedures for research**, sample collection, import and export

Could your presence **harm the community?**

What is the **purpose of your fieldwork?**

Who are you **engaging** in research design?

How are you **creating space for locals** to raise issues and interests important to them?

Are you including **questions the community itself would like** to explore through research?

Could you conduct a **scoping visit to explore the interests and needs** of local communities?

What **benefits** will your research bring?

Are you **trying to do too much** in the time available?

How will you conduct research with participants who have **conflicting interests?**

Are you aware of the **visa, legal and fieldwork permitting** procedures in your research country?

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2 ESTABLISHING WAYS OF WORKING

Research that would be **prohibited in a high-income country should not be conducted** in low-income countries

Researchers must **prioritise people's dignity, safety and wellbeing** over the project goals

Methods and approaches must be **socially, culturally and environmentally sensitive**

Researchers should aim to **minimise their project's environmental and carbon footprints**

Researchers must **engage with all relevant ethical regulations** and **insurance policies**

Researchers **should not accept funding** that would require **unethical behaviours**

Researchers should **undertake pre-fieldwork training**, including on mental health and safety, to prepare for fieldwork stress and how to look after their and others' wellbeing

Researchers should **consider their physical and mental health** before engaging in fieldwork

Before fieldwork, researchers must **prepare contingency plans** in case things go wrong

Researchers should **know emergency help protocols** and contact procedures / numbers

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What **ethical principles** do you and your research partners commit to upholding? (e.g. respect, trust, care and honesty)

How are you **looking after** your own and your research teams' **mental health and wellbeing?**

How are you **protecting field team members** who may be at risk due to their gender, sexual orientation, religion etc.? (including yourself)

Have you considered alternative research approaches that would **reduce flying?** (e.g. by increasing local researcher involvement)

What will you do if **faced with cultural expectations that are illegal**, such as bribery?

What **accountability mechanisms** are in place to ensure ethical practices are adhered to? What will happen if they are not upheld?

Is someone in your home institution **up to date with your fieldwork plans?**

Are research partners, participants and local communities **able to give feedback,** including anonymously?

Are you **allowing sufficient time** in the field to set up logistical arrangements that are fair and not overly burdensome to research staff / communities before collecting data?

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3 WORKING WITH FIELD RESEARCH STAFF

Expectations of roles, behaviours and responsibilities should be set clearly before fieldwork starts

Researchers should **discuss and develop the budget with research staff** before finalising it

Tasks and responsibilities should be shared equitably among the research team and should be commensurate with researchers' experience and abilities

Research staff's **local knowledge** should be respected

Local researchers should be **encouraged, trained and enabled** to lead projects

Research staff's **contributions must be fairly recognised** and made visible, including through appropriate co-authorship according to their wishes and other ways they have identified that would be helpful to them

Researchers should **support their staff's career development** and future employment

Research staff must be provided with **fair working conditions,** including reasonable hours, remuneration, sick leave and holiday

Researchers **should not ask staff to take on undue risk.** Fieldwork must be preceded by a risk assessment covering all team members

Research staff must be **protected from potential risks** related to their work (e.g. physical danger or political persecution)

Researchers must carefully **set expectations with local people** who help out on projects but are not working as paid team members

How are you **selecting field research staff?**

Have you established a **collaborative research agreement,** consented to by both parties?

How are you **addressing team power dynamics and hierarchies** related to members' age, gender etc., or related to your control of the project budget and decisions?

How would you **handle disagreements** with staff about appropriate ways of working?

Are **field staff involved** in all project stages?

How are you creating space for field staff to **share their knowledge, ideas and criticisms?**

How can you **align research staff's tasks** to the skills and expertise they want to develop?

How do you ensure the work and expertise of research staff are **recognised and visible?**

How can you **support your research staff's future careers,** especially at early stages? (e.g. research stays, help with applications)

How can you **balance time/budget constraints** whilst providing fair working conditions?

Are there differences in how you and your field research staff are perceived and treated?

Do you consider **all field team members** engaged in collecting data **to be researchers?**

How do you **refer to field team members?** As "field assistants"? Or as "field researchers" or "field research staff"?

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4 BUILDING CROSS-CULTURAL RELATIONSHIPS

Researchers should only conduct fieldwork with the **advance consent of the community**

When negotiating entrance into the community, **researchers must be clear, open and honest** about their purpose, the research process, how information will be used, and potential benefits

Researchers should **familiarise themselves with cultural norms and customs** beforehand, e.g. gender norms, dress, greetings and offensive behaviours

Researchers **should not generalise across contexts** or assume that local cultural norms are the same as in other places they have visited and/or conducted research before

Researchers **should not try to impose their own lifestyle or customs** on local communities

Where possible, researchers should **make efforts to learn some of the local language**, starting with phrases such as greetings, to avoid placing the total burden on others to speak English

Researchers must **respect local communities' knowledge,** experience and realities

Researchers must fully consider expectations and power inequalities before entering into any friendly, romantic or sexual relationship. **Researchers should not engage in any such relationship** with research participants

As far as possible, **researchers should avoid making promises** (e.g. to provide certain benefits), but they must honour any made

Researchers **must not use illiteracy or language barriers as an excuse** to not give full information to participants and communities

Are you **allowing sufficient time** to engage with and build trust in the local community before you start collecting data?

What **power dynamics and imbalances** are there between you and the community?

How do you **handle local ethical values if they are different** to your own?

How do you **respond to personal questions**, e.g. about religion, family or relationships? What if these are illegal or outside of the cultural norm in the host country?

What do you do if you are expected to gift or participate in **events involving drugs / alcohol?**

What do you do if faced with **behaviour that you consider harmful or unethical** but is locally culturally acceptable? (e.g. referring to local justice procedures rather than attempting to immediately intervene in a situation, as this may have unforeseen consequences)

What sorts of **relationships are appropriate** between you / research partners / participants / local communities?

How do you navigate **boundaries between being a researcher and a friend?**

How do you respond to **people in need?** Do you have a **duty of care?**

Do you offer **compensation** to participants?

How do your **position and personal identities** affect your interactions (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, age, disability, seniority, nationality, marital status)?

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5 USING RESEARCH FINDINGS

Researchers should only report on matters they **understand well**

Wherever appropriate, researchers **should share research findings** with participants and local communities in formats and languages accessible to them

Researchers must **avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes** about participants or local communities

Researchers should **engage with the ethics** of capturing photographs and video footage of participants and local communities

As far as possible, **data collected should be made open** and available to all researchers, regardless of their location

Where possible, when taking samples, specimens should be **deposited at local institutions**

Can you **involve participants** in data analysis?

Who has the final say about how results are interpreted? What if participants or field staff disagree with your interpretation?

Do you have your **research subjects' best interest**s in mind?

Could your research results be used to oppress or undermine the host communities or individuals / groups within them?

Have you **budgeted time and money for disseminating** your results to research participants?

How can you disseminate your results amongst participants **in a meaningful way?**

Who should profit if the research findings are financially profitable?

Who owns the research data, results and any samples collected?

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6 CREATING A LASTING POSITIVE IMPACT

From early on, researchers should **consider what lasting positive impacts** are within their capacity to leave. Researchers with long or large-scale projects may be more ambitious

Researchers should **aim to build partnerships that will last** and, where appropriate, work to maintain relationships with research partners and local communities after fieldwork ends

Where possible, researchers should **support lasting opportunities for locals,** such as jobs and training programmes

At a minimum, research **must not leave behind economic or employment vacuums** or dependencies

Researchers should try to **share the lessons** they have learned doing fieldwork with others conducting research in the same context

What **positive legacies** can you create?

How can you **strengthen local capacity** and independent research in the host country?

Can you **push for positive policy changes?**

Could you **align with grassroots movements?**

Can you **support academic opportunities for local researchers,** such as more local funding opportunities and non-English publications?

Can you **build a positive pathway for future researchers** who will enter the same communities?

How will you report and learn from incidents in the field? To whom will you de-brief?

How can you **share what you have learned** with other researchers?

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