Ethics Principles for Research with Human Participants

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The Open University

'Research ethics' refers to moral principles and actions guiding and shaping research from inception through to completion, the dissemination of findings and the archiving, future use, sharing and linking of data. While research ethics has a long history, originating with medical ethics and then extending to other forms of research with humans, it also has a history of evolution and development. Research ethics in the social sciences initially drew on the 'patient protection' model of medical research but has more recently broadened in scope to cover all areas of research and include consideration of benefits, risks and harms to all persons connected with and affected by research, as well as the broader responsibilities of researchers to publics and society.

The core principles of research ethics date back to the Aristotelian concept of 'eudemonia' or 'good living' and are commonly summed in the two terms of 'beneficence' (do good) and 'non-maleficence' (do no harm).

Research disciplines involved in the whole range of research involving humans have elaborated and extended these basic ideas, and there is a wealth of literature and guidance available. The field of research ethics is active and constantly developing. Researchers are advised to explore what is currently available specific to their field of enquiry, including existing data in repositories. This could be from their learned societies, in relevant literature and in requirements and guidance of funders and sponsors.

The Open University has played a part in developing ethics guidance for researchers and the following institutional principles are consistent with what is currently generally accepted across the spectrum of social sciences.

Open University researchers and their project associates and agents should:

- aim to maximise benefit and minimise harm

- respect the privacy, autonomy, diversity, values, and dignity of individuals, groups and communities

- act with integrity throughout, employing the most appropriate methods for the research purpose

- have regard to their social and professional responsibilities in conducting and disseminating their research

- engage fully with the Open University opportunities for research ethics review, guidance and training

The application of these principles in specific research projects will require careful thought and consideration. Researchers are advised to engage with this analysis and reasoning during all stages of their research.

Human Research Ethics Committee

NB: Researchers should adhere to relevant internal policy and guidance, in particular, the OU Research Code of Practice.