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

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

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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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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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SUPPLEMENTARY TOOLKIT

HOW TO USE THE CODE OF CONDUCT

The Code is a handy guide to navigating ethical challenges that arise during fieldwork. It addresses the gap left by existing institutional ethics review processes, including interpersonal power dynamics, conflicts of interest and working with field teams. The Code is for any researcher who does fieldwork, across different disciplines, country contexts and career stages.

The Code is designed to be a living document, adapted to your specific fieldwork context by you and your research partners. It is not a mandatory part of any formal ethics review process. We encourage you to use the prompts as a starting point for self-reflection and conversation with your fieldwork teams. In larger teams, an ethics champion could ensure the group upholds ethical behaviours whilst recognising each individual's responsibility. Students may use the Code to facilitate discussions with supervisors and set expectations around support before they embark on fieldwork.

The Code is deliberately ambitious in scope to prompt researchers to think critically about their fieldwork practices and how they interact with people during the course of their research. Not all points may apply to your specific fieldwork or be possible to implement within your time and financial constraints. We encourage researchers, particularly students and early career researchers, to focus on what you can do. Experienced researchers and those with large research projects and budgets may aim to be more ambitious. It is important to note that researchers' own positionality and intersectional identities (e.g. race, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, etc.) will affect ethical dynamics in the field.

Universities and research organisations have an institutional responsibility to support fieldworkers in their endeavours towards ethical practice. In addition to the Code and the resources listed below, we encourage researchers to take full advantage of training offered by your department, division or research institution. We also recommend learning from other researchers from your institution and the host country who have conducted fieldwork in the same area.

PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING THE CODE OF CONDUCT

The Code was commissioned by the School of Geography and the Environment, as suggested by the Graduate Collective's template for change on dismantling systemic racism. Currently, University of Oxford researchers are only required to complete Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) processes if they are conducting research with human participants, and CUREC is limited to issues such as gaining participants' consent and secure storage of personal data. However, a wide range of ethical issues and interpersonal dynamics can arise through interactions with research partners, participants or local communities during fieldwork, regardless of the type of research being conducted. This Code of Conduct addresses that gap.

We started by searching for best practice examples of guides for ethical fieldwork and found a lack of relevant or comprehensive examples from other universities, research institutions, funding bodies or NGOs. We, therefore, expanded our literature review to include grey papers, academic networks/blogs and some peer-reviewed articles. We also consulted researchers working on similar initiatives in other institutions. Using this information, we compiled a set of ethical issues that can arise during fieldwork. We gathered feedback on the draft Code of Conduct and additional recommendations document through focus group discussions with field researchers, at different career stages, living in the Global North and the Global South.

LANGUAGE AROUND "FIELDWORK" AND "FIELD ASSISTANTS"

There are debates concerning the problematic use of the term "fieldwork" (see this **blog post** by Rachel Strohm) and "field assistants". It has been argued that "field" is a neo-colonial term that 'others' those that participate in research studies and perpetuates the unequal power relations between Northern researchers and Southern citizens. Where there is a colonial history to contend with, we encourage field researchers to also reflect on this language. Our Code is intended to be used by any researcher, of any country, in any country, hence we have decided to retain use of the generalisable term "field". However, we discourage the term "field assistants" and suggest a shift towards more empowering and equalising language such as "field researchers" or "field research staff".

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LINKS TO RESOURCES

University of Oxford research integrity and ethics

These open-access documents are particularly useful for researchers who do not have established ethics procedures at their research institution.

› **University policies and codes of practice**
(e.g. collecting personal data from participants)

› **Best practice guidance** (e.g. **Social science research conducted outside of the UK)**

Free online research ethics training courses

› **Global Health Training Centre: Social Science, Ethics & Communities**

› **Introduction to Research Ethics: Working with People**

› **People Studying People: Research Ethics in Society**

› **Community Based Research: Getting Started**

The ethics of care in field data collection

› **The ethics of care**

› **Compassionate research**

Working with vulnerable groups

› **Research with Refugees in Fragile Political Contexts**

› **Ethical guidelines for research with displaced people**

› **Research with children: ethics, safety and avoiding harm**

Working with indigenous communities

› **Guidelines for approaching research in indigenous settings**

› **Code of Ethics for research with indigenous communities**

Compensation for research assistants, participants and local communities

› **Participant compensation in global health research: a case study**

› **Ethical and practical considerations of paying research participants**

Relationships in the field

› **Sex, romance, and research subjects: an ethical exploration**

› **The field as a landscape of desire: sex and sexuality in geographical fieldwork**

› **Masculinity and frank consideration of sexual attraction in fieldwork**

Wellbeing of field research staff (including women, BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ staff)

› **"This isn't getting easier": Valuing emotion in development research**

› **Vicarious [secondary] trauma training, University of Oxford**

› **Preventing Harassment in Fieldwork Situations Report, University of Washington**

› **Sexual(ized) harassment and ethnographic fieldwork: A silenced aspect of social research**

› **The fieldwork initiative (sexual trauma in fieldwork)**

› **Sexual violence during research**

› **Protecting BIPOC scholars in the field**

› **Advice for women travelling abroad**

› **LGBTQIA+ foreign travel advice**

› **Safe Overseas Travel Guidance for Staff with Protected Characteristics**

› **Fieldwork and disability: an overview for an inclusive experience**

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Conflicts with your own ethical value system

❯ **Concealing researcher identity in fieldwork**

❯ **Everyday risks and professional dilemmas: fieldwork with alcohol-based subcultures**

Flexibility in the field

❯ **Getting prepared to be prepared: How interpersonal skills aid fieldwork in challenging contexts**

❯ **Mediating messiness: expanding ideas of flexibility, reflexivity, and embodiment in fieldwork**

❯ **Remote [management of] field data collection: Doing fieldwork in a pandemic**

Guidelines for ethical photography

❯ **Upholding the rights of the people in the pictures**

❯ **Bond's Ethical Guidelines for the collection and use of content**

Comics about fieldwork challenges

❯ **MDG Comics**

❯ **Bukavu Comic Series**

References

The following documents were drawn upon in developing the Code of Conduct.

Existing Ethics Guidelines

❯ **A Guide for Transboundary Research Partnerships: 11 Principles** (KFPE, 2012)

❯ **Charter of Decolonial Research Ethics** (Decolonidad Europa, 2013)

❯ **Ethical considerations when conservation research involves people** (S Brittain et al. in Conservation Biology, 2020)

❯ **Ethical Guidelines for Community/Ecology Fieldwork & Research** (Mary Watkins, Pacifica Graduate Institute, 2017)

❯ **Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Settings** (TRUST, 2018)

❯ **Guidance for research in response to humanitarian emergencies** (Wellcome Centre for Ethics and Humanities, 2020)

❯ **Guidelines for healthy global scientific collaborations** (D Armenteras in Nature Ecology & Evolution, 2021)

❯ **Power, Prestige & Forgotten Values: A Disaster Studies Manifesto** (JC Gaillard et al., 2021)

❯ **Research Ethics: A practical guide** (Oxfam, 2020)

❯ **Research Ethics Guidance** (Social Research Association, 2021)

❯ **San Code of Research Ethics** (South African San Institute, 2017)

❯ **Six fieldwork expectations: Code of conduct for teams on field projects** (Sara Perry, 2020)

❯ **Statement on Ethics** (American Anthropological Association, 2012)

❯ **Statement on Professional Ethics** (Association of American Geographers, 2009)

❯ **Ten simple rules for Global North researchers to stop perpetuating helicopter research in the Global South** (Haelewaters et al. in PLOS Comput. Biol., 2021)

Blogs, networks and opinion pieces

❯ **Africa's next decolonisation battle should be about knowledge** (David Mwambari, 2019)

❯ **Ethics in development research: 'doing no harm' when conducting research in the global South** (German Development Institute (DIE), 2021)

❯ **Field Research Methods Lab** (London School of Economics, 2021)

❯ **How to truly decolonise the study of Africa** (Robtel Neajai Pailey, 2019)

❯ **(Silent) Voices blog – Bukavu Series** (Governance in Conflict Network, 2020)

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