**ADVICE FOR ETHICS APPLICATIONS**

by Simon Moss

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| **Introduction** |

If your research involves human or animal participants, you will need to complete the relevant ethics application. To help you complete these applications, this webpage supplies a few sample ethics applications. In contrast, this document offers some guidance to assist you on some of the more contentious questions. At this time, most of the advice revolves around research on humans.

**General advice**

If you are uncertain about how to answer a question, google “National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007), updated in 2018”. You can then cite specific guidelines on this webpage to justify your responses.

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| **Preliminary questions** |

**Project title**

The project title on your ethics application also needs to appear on the Information Sheet for Participants, previously called the Plain Language Statement, as well as the Consent Form. However, on the Information Sheet for Participants or Consent Form, you can also include a supplementary heading that participants can understand more easily. For example, on the Information Sheet for Participants or Consent Form

* the project title and ethics application number might appear in the header
* a simpler heading could then appear at the top of your Information Sheet for Participants or Consent Form

**Proposed commencement date**

You cannot collect data—such as interview participants or distribute surveys—until after the proposed commencement date and after you have received ethical clearance. Indeed, you cannot even conduct a pilot study before the commencement date. However, you can prepare your study before the commencement date. The following table presents some illustrations of these preparatory activities.

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| Activity | Example |
| Seek feedback from colleagues or friends | * You could ask a few close friends to evaluate and proofread your survey or procedures. * This procedure differs from a pilot study because you would never publish this feedback |
| Seek interest from potential informants | * You might contact potential informants to ask these individuals whether they might, in principle, be interested in participating in your study * You cannot, however, obtain informed consent until after you receive clearance from the ethics committee |
| Organize people to help you collect data | * You could ask managers of organizations whether they might, in principle, help you collect data—such as distribute a survey to employees |

**Proposed completion date**

Your completion date should be as late as possible. You can receive approval for five years. Therefore, especially if enrolled in a PhD, your completion date should be five years after your commencement date.

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| **Description of the project** |

In this section, you should briefly

* outline the issue that needs to be solved—some problem in society or controversy in the literature for example
* outline the aim of your research—that is, how you intend to solve this issue—and, hence, the research question or objectives.
* outline the method; in particular, you should usually describe the participants, including eligibility criteria, the procedures applied to recruit participants, and the tasks that participants need to complete

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| **Potential participants** |

**8a. Potential participants**

Some researchers like to recruit participants from social media, such as Facebook. For example, on their Facebook page, they might create a post that reads something like “If you would like to complete an anonymous survey on whether carrots enhance intelligence, please press this link…”. This avenue should generally be avoided especially if

* you encourage your friends to send this link to their friends. This snowballing of participants can generate unreasonably high sample sizes
* you can ascertain who has completed your study; if participants feel you can determine whether they have completed your study, they might feel too obliged to participate.

**8e. Dependent relationships**

You need to be sensitive to the notion of implicit coercion. In particular, if individuals are dependent upon the researcher in some sense, they might feel obliged to participate in research—even if this participation might be very inconvenient or distressing. For example, the researchers

* might be managers or potential employers of participants
* might teach and thus evaluate these participants.

In these circumstances, the researchers should guarantee they cannot determine whether these individuals have agreed to participate. Otherwise, these individuals might feel unnecessarily obliged to participate.

**8f. Inducements**

To attract and to compensate participants, some researchers offer rewards, such as payment or prizes. Inducements that compensate the effort that participants devote to this study may be appropriate. But, in particular circumstances, some inducements are inappropriate. The following table summarises some unsuitable inducements.

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| Inducement | Concern |
| Lottery tickets and raffles | Lottery tickets, although sometimes utilized to induce participants, are sometimes inherently unfair. The problem is that   * participants typically receive no tangible return on lottery tickets * participants might overestimate the expected return on lottery tickets—and thus might regret their participation   If the participants are not likely to be susceptible to these risks—perhaps because they might have participated regardless of the lottery tickets—this approach might be acceptable. |
| Excessive inducements | Inducements should be modest and commensurate with the effort that participants devote to the study, called the proportionality principle. The level of inducement will vary across settings and circumstances. These inducements should not be so pronounced that   * individuals feel compelled to participate in a study that could elicit significant distress or discomfort * individuals might regret their decision   In many studies, participants receive about $5 to $10 an hour. But, in some settings, you should consult relevant individuals to clarify a suitable inducement. |
| Rates of inducement that vary across participants | In some instances, not all participants will receive the same rate of compensation. For example   * you might want to inform participants that perhaps their payment depends on their performance on some task * this scheme is arguably unfair, because people who are more capable receive greater payment   If necessary to the design, you could indicate that payment depends on performance, but then   * pay everyone the same amount—the maximum that was promised * justify this deception during the debriefing |

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| **Benefits and risks** |

**9c and 9d**

You need to identify the potential risks of your study. To help you complete this task, the following table illustrates some typical risks

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| Risk | Example |
| Physical risks |  |
| Safety to participants | * During the study, participants might initiate activities that compromise their safety—such as lift heavy equipment or travel to precarious locations |
| Safety to researcher | * During the study, researchers might need to initiate activities that compromise their safety |
| Aggression of participants | * The participants—if prisoners for example—might become aggressive towards the researcher |
| Social risks |  |
| Public behaviours | * Participants might need to initiate embarrassing acts while observed by other people |
| Private information in publications | * Publications might reveal something private about participants |
| Psychological risks |  |
| Distressing information | * Participants might receive information about themselves or other individuals that is distressing or upsetting |
| Suppressed information | * The study might evoke distressing or upsetting memories that participants had suppressed |
| Legal risks |  |
| Admission of illegal activity | * During the research, participants might disclose an illegal act they plan to commit or have committed in the past |
| Dissemination of information that could implicate someone else in a crime | * During the research, participants might disclose information that implicates some other person or body in a crime |

**9f**

If you acknowledge various risks, you then need to discuss how you will negate, minimize, or manage these risks. The following table offers some insight on how to achieve this goal.

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| Risk | How to negate, minimize, or manage this risk |
| Legal risks |  |
| Admission of illegal activity | Sometimes, the participants might disclose illegal activity. However, if these participants cannot be identified, the risks are negligible. As evidence of this principle, according to Chapter 4.6 of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Resources,   * when the data are not identifiable, the ethics application does not need to be reviewed by the HREC, even if participants might disclose illegal activity * furthermore, if the data are not identifiable, the researchers cannot disclose this information in response to statutory obligations or legal orders * similarly, if the data are not identifiable, the participants and researchers are no more vulnerable after disclosing this information |

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| **Informed consent** |

**10e. Deception**

To gain informed consent, participants must be informed. They must understand the purpose of this research, the activities they will need to complete, and so forth. Sometimes, however, researchers may need to deceive participants. This following table outlines some illustrations of studies in which participants need to be deceived—and clarifies how to implement these circumstances ethically.

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| Situation | Potential responses to implement these circumstances ethically |
| **Covert observation**. Sometimes, you may want to observe participants covertly; otherwise, if they are attuned to your presence, they might adapt their behaviour | * We will observe only people we do not know, so the data are anonymous * We will observe people in public, so they know that somebody might be watching * We will not video record anyone without their consent |
| **Concealed purpose**. Sometimes, you might want to conceal the purpose of some activity from participants. For example, they might complete a task they assume measures intelligence but actually measures persistence | * We will inform participants of the actual purpose of this exercise at the end. * After they receive this information, participants will be asked whether they want to submit or withdraw their data. Hence, participants will be granted an opportunity to withdraw their data * In the Information Sheet for Participants , we will broadly refer to the actual purpose of this study, such as motivation. Thus, participants are aware the study could explore a topic related to the concealed purpose: persistence * Furthermore, participants could be informed that some of the aims will be revealed later. For example, the researcher could write “Because we do not want to influence your responses, some of the aims of this study will be revealed later” |
| **Fictitious information**. Sometimes, you might want to deliver fictitious information to participants. To illustrate, you might want to impart information about a fake study. Or you might want to inform participants they have been rejected by a peer to gauge the impact of social exclusion, for example. | * As soon as the key measures are administered, participants will be informed the information they received was fictitious * They will be informed of the purpose of this fictitious information * The Information Sheet for Participants will refer to the emotions or thoughts that participants could experience during this study. Hence, the fictitious information is unlikely to elicit emotions or thoughts the participants had not anticipated. |

In practice, you would never convey the purpose of every facet of this study in detail. In the Information Sheet for Participants, you would never write “This measure explores latent self-coherence” or something like that. Instead, you would refer to everyday approximations, such as “attitudes” or “motivation”. Deception does not refer to imprecise descriptions of your study. Instead, deception refers to deliberate attempts to mislead participants—to instil untrue assumptions.