



the british  
psychological society  
ethics committee

## GUIDANCE

# Ethics best practice guidance on conducting research with human participants during Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in some unprecedented changes across society. Conducting research during such times can result in increased practical and ethical challenges, not least because the need to rapidly generate evidence must be balanced with the realities of the situation.

This document does not provide a definitive guide for decision making but aims to assist researchers in recognising ethical practice issues during these unique circumstances. It is intended as an aid to ethical decisions. It should be used alongside the *Code of Human Research Ethics* and *Code of Ethics and Conduct*.

The Code of Human Research Ethics highlights four primary ethical principles:

Respect for the autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals and communities;

Scientific integrity;

Social responsibility;

Maximising benefit and minimising harm.

These principles should be borne in mind when considering the continuation of research during the pandemic or proposing to conduct new research at this time. It is important to ensure compliance with [UK Government guidance](#) that is current at the time of data collection (such as social distancing as wearing of personal protection equipment).

## RESPECT

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Psychologists have respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons. During the pandemic, it is especially important to consider the additional stress and pressures that individuals may be experiencing. Researchers should consider and be sensitive to the extent and nature of vulnerabilities in individuals and groups who may be

disproportionately affected by the pandemic. As at all other times, being mindful of potential power imbalances, individuals must not be pressured or coerced into taking part in the research.

Where the conduct of the research may need to be changed from face-to-face to online, the nature of these changes must be fully documented and submitted for review, as appropriate and according to the university's or sponsor's requirements. Researchers should also be mindful that individuals who may have previously agreed to face-to-face data gathering may choose not to be involved in the research or they may change their mind and withdraw from the research later on. Valid consent should be renewed under these circumstances and transparency in relation to deadlines for declaring withdrawal and withholding/destruction of already supplied data must be assured.

At all times, people's rights must be respected and protected.

## SCIENTIFIC INTEGRITY

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Research should be designed, reviewed and conducted in a way that ensures its quality, integrity and contribution to the development of knowledge and understanding.

If a researcher decides to conduct their research online instead of face-to-face, the methodology should be updated as well as the guidance/information to participants. The Society's guidance on *Conducting Internet Mediated Research* should be utilised to support the obtaining and recording of valid consent.

Protocols for dealing with sensitive issues should be developed. This includes anything that could have lasting effects or other kinds of high risk (for example, if moving to online research from face-to-face research with vulnerable participants raises safeguarding issues). The researcher must also check with their university whether such modification requests need to be submitted for ethics review and approval.

For non Covid-19 research, researchers should also consider the generalisability of the results obtained during these unusual circumstances.

## SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

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In whatever social context they work, psychologists should acknowledge the evolution of social structures in relation to societal need and be respectful of such structures. During the pandemic, as at all other times, outcomes should not only support and reflect respect for the dignity and integrity of persons (both individually and collectively) but also contribute to the 'common good'.

During the pandemic, only research that is of a high social value should be conducted. The temptation to brand all research as 'Covid-19 relevant' to gain accelerated ethics review and institutional approval must be resisted. The beneficiaries of the research (short, medium and long-term) must be clear.

## MAXIMISING BENEFIT AND MINIMISING HARM

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Psychologists should consider all research from the standpoint of the research participants and any other persons, groups or communities who may be potentially affected by the research, with the aim of avoiding potential risks to psychological wellbeing, mental health, personal values, the invasion of privacy or dignity. Normally, the risk of harm should be no greater than that encountered in ordinary life, for example, people should not be exposed to risks greater than or additional to those to which they are exposed in their normal lifestyles.

For research carried out in applied settings (such as educational institutions, hospitals, care homes etc.), the burden of the research on individuals (such as teachers, medical staff etc.) in those settings must be considered.

It is important to acknowledge that it can be difficult to determine all potential risks at the outset of a piece of research. However, as outlined under scientific integrity above, researchers should endeavour to identify and assess all possible risks and develop protocols for risk management as an integral part of the design of the project, and ensure that appropriate levels of ethics review are sought.

This is especially important in the context of Covid-19, where social distancing and other protective measures are in place. This means that no face-to-face research should be conducted unless your university has advised that it is permissible to do so and requirements for minimising risks, including government guidance are adhered to. Researchers are advised to consider how best to proceed with their research on a case by case basis and in accordance with the guidance from their university and UK Government.

## RESOURCES

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[BPS Sources of Guidance](#)

[Code of Ethics and Conduct](#)

[Code of Human Research Ethics](#)

[Conducting Internet Mediated Research](#)

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

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[Heath Research Authority](#)



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