



the british
psychological society
ethics committee

GUIDANCE

Statement on ethics review and independent research with human participants

We recognise that where a researcher is working independently from any organisation that has an established, formal ethics review process it can be difficult to know how to proceed if the researcher is seeking a review for their project.

It is a requirement of many academic journals that an author reporting human research attests to a favourable opinion having been given following a review of the ethics protocol for their research. It is also, more often than not, a requirement in submitting applications for research funding that a review has been carried out or that there is provision for a review if the project is funded.

There is also a moral argument that any human research project that raises ethics issues should be independently reviewed and that the research data collection is not started until a favourable opinion is received.

Ethics review must be understood in the broader context of research governance that encompasses all aspects of research management, including sponsorship of research. Sponsorship, not to be confused with funding, provides assurance that research complies with all legal and regulatory requirements, as well as being deemed ethical, following independent review. It is, essentially, a sponsor that provides approval for research to proceed – an ethics committee can only provide an ethics opinion. The most common example of a research sponsor is a university, but other examples include NHS Trusts, other public organisations, for example some Local Authority Social Services, larger charities and some commercial organisations such as pharmaceutical companies. On occasion, it is necessary for sponsors to seek external ethics review, the most obvious example is where there are legal or policy requirements necessitating review by a Health Research Authority Ethics Research Committee.

When researchers make funding applications or seek publication opportunities, they will normally be required to identify the research sponsor (often by declaring their academic or professional affiliation). It is normal to attest to a favourable ethics opinion but it is equally important to identify the sponsor.

GUIDANCE

THE ROLE OF THE BRITISH PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY (BPS)

We have no facility for sponsoring research with all the responsibilities this entails. Nor are we able to provide independent ethics review. The BPS Ethics Committee's role is to promote ethical practice in the science, education, research and practical application of psychology and to support the Society in ensuring that the education, training, research and practice of psychology are based on sound ethics standards.

However, the Ethics Committee can provide support through published and informal ethics advice. Published guidance includes the *Code of Ethics and Conduct*, the *Code of Human Research Ethics*, *Statement of Policy on Authorship and Publication Credit*, and *Guidance for the Conduct of Internet Mediated Research*. The Committee can also provide confidential informal advice, based on the best practice set out in these publications, to queries submitted to ethical.enquiries@bps.org.uk.

OTHER SOURCES OF ETHICS REVIEW

Some researchers work in organisations that might have sufficient resources to sponsor research (sometimes by sub-contracting to commercial research organisations) but do not have an internal research ethics committee. In these circumstances, researchers and their sponsors seek external independent research ethics review.

Some university research ethics committees are open to receiving applications for review from researchers who are not affiliated in any way with the university and are prepared to give an informal or formal response, either by chair's action or through a process that involves other committee members, ranging up to full review by the same process as for university-linked research.

Contact should be made with the secretary of a university committee to explore what options are available. It is possible that more than one university would need to be contacted before an acceptable agreement can be reached. It should be noted that some universities will charge for this service. Achieving access to ethics review by a university committee could be facilitated by finding an academic member of a university who is prepared to join the research as a co-investigator; this would have the effect of achieving university sponsorship.

Some larger charities and commercial organisations that carry out research have research ethics committees that might consider reviewing project protocols that fall within their own areas of interest. Here also, seeking an engagement in the project by a researcher within the charity or organisation might facilitate access to sponsorship and ethics review.

There is a small number of independent research ethics committees. These will charge for their services but often on a not-for-profit basis. They do not normally offer sponsorship.

ETHICS REVIEW – SELF-ASSESSMENT

Where it is not possible to find a means of gaining a formal review, completing the sample ethics review application proforma in the *Code of Human Research Ethics* will help to ensure that relevant ethics issues are considered and that there is a documented protocol for the research project.

Minimal risk projects may be considered to not require a formal ethics review. However, establishing that a particular project is indeed minimal risk depends on having carried out a thorough risk assessment.

The Economic and Social Research Council has extensive web-based [guidance](#) on research ethics, including a checklist that can help to identify specific areas of ethics in research that require special attention.

RESOURCES

[Code of Ethics and Conduct](#)

[Code of Human Research Ethics](#)

[Conducting Internet Mediated Research](#)

[Neuroethics](#)

[Member Conduct Rules](#)

USEFUL LINKS

[Health Research Authority](#)

[The Association of Research Managers and Administrators](#)

[UK Research Integrity Office](#)



the british
psychological society
promoting excellence in psychology

St Andrews House,
48 Princess Road East,
Leicester LE1 7DR, UK

☎ 0116 254 9568 🌐 www.bps.org.uk ✉ info@bps.org.uk