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Rethinking Research Ethics in the Humanities: Principles and Recommendations

Research Report

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Table of contents

	Executive summary	4
	Agreed conclusions	5
	Rationale and General themes arising	6
1	Politics of research ethics	8
2	Role of ethics committees	8
3	Informed consent	11
4	Anonymity and protecting research participants	11
5	Online research and online threats	12
6	Covert fieldwork	13
7	Post-field ethics	14
Appendix I	Acknowledgements	16
Appendix II	Recommended reading on principles and recommendations	17

Executive summary

There continues to be overwhelming dissatisfaction in the academic community with the current operation of the practices and processes for managing research ethics in the Humanities.

While there have been many positive developments in the constitution and operation of University Research Ethics Committees (henceforth UREC), their frameworks as currently constituted remain locked in a tradition associated with natural sciences research which is inappropriate for numerous Humanities disciplines. There is in addition a wide divergence in the quality of expertise, procedures, and practices across URECs and inconsistency in terms of whether research projects are awarded ethical approval or not. These factors downgrade UK Higher Education research power in the Humanities and impact on researchers, particularly Postgraduate and Early-Career Researchers, as well as the communities that researchers collaborate with, in several respects.

To achieve change, this report proposes a series of principles and recommendations (all of which will demand additional investment from Higher Education Institutions and funders) which would require:

- URECs to be de-coupled from concerns of brand management, feasibility, and data protection;
- Less focus on the physical form of ethical processes (e.g., written participant-information sheets, debrief sheets), which can be inappropriate for particular types of research in the Humanities, and more focus on the extent to which processes can ensure that participant communities and participants themselves are empowered to be partners in the research production process;
- URECs, and the frameworks by which URECs operate, to be reconfigured to provide ongoing (including post-research) ethical and practical support for researchers;
- URECs to bring in *ad hoc* expertise on methods or fields of study in the Humanities on a more consistent basis;
- URECs to consider ways in which best practice and resources can be shared on a cross-institutional basis.

Agreed conclusions

The *Principles and Recommendations* set out in this document are an outcome of the Arts & Humanities Research Council-funded *Rethinking Research Ethics* Network (AH/V001043/1). The document was written by Jonathan Kasstan, Victoria Brooks, and Geoff Pearson. The contents have been drawn from consultation with the academic community, following a seminar (online) on 10/11/2021 and a stakeholder workshop at the University of Manchester on 21/04/2022. Interim findings were then presented in a dedicated feedback workshop at the Annual Ethnography Symposium, University of Suffolk on 25/08/22. Further online consultation of the draft principles and recommendations took place between September-December 2022 with Network members, before the Network's final workshop at the University of Westminster on 12/01/2023 to agree conclusions and final wording. Serving members of University Research Ethics Committees (hereafter UREC), including UREC chairs, as well as researchers at all ranks, including research students, sector stakeholders, and funding bodies have all participated in these Network activities. The authors thank all participants who attended these activities for their contributions, from which the *Principles and Recommendations* below have emerged.

The *Principles and Recommendations* provided in this document have been drawn together by broad agreement. We have not sought endorsement from every Network member or stakeholder who attended Network activities, or who participated in consultation exercises. Not every individual necessarily endorses every principle or recommendation set out below. However, the *Principles and Recommendations* all received wide support across the Network. Further, no notable differences emerged between delegates at different stages in their career or between those who have, and have not, served on URECs.

There was unanimous agreement that the current system of awarding ethical approval and managing ethics in Higher Education is in urgent need of fundamental reform. Some Network members were of the view that URECs were simply not best placed to manage research ethics and should be replaced altogether. Others were of the opinion that the role of URECs should not include considering questions of risk to, and wellbeing of, the researcher. However, a majority of Network members were of the view that reformed URECs still have a role to play in both awarding ethical approval and managing ethics and risks to the researcher on an ongoing basis.

Rationale and methodology

The purpose of the AHRC RRE-organised Seminar and Workshop #1 was to identify: (a) key questions and problems contributing to perturbing ethically-challenging qualitative research in the Humanities; and (b) the areas that the RRE network was to focus on. Participants communicated their concerns regarding research ethics frameworks and processes, which then formed the basis of the network's activities in working to achieve its outcomes. This document is one such outcome. A summary of the themes from the Seminar and Workshop #1 are set out below under *General themes arising*. From these, a series of *Principles and Recommendations* have been proposed that have been grouped according to seven primary headings, which have been derived from the *General themes*, and which are numerated below. The AHRC have engaged with Network activities, where they have articulated momentum in seeking to reform practices and to work more closely with Higher Education Institutions (henceforth HEIs) in order to move away from a tick-box exercise and to begin to address the concerns raised below. In 2021, UKRI also funded an ethics consultant to develop a policy paper (to be published) on key lessons for funders, as well as a set of ethical guidelines for both reviewers and applicants.

General themes arising:

- While there have been some improvements in ethical review processes in Humanities work over the past few decades, there is considerable inconsistency in the approach of different HEIs and funding bodies, and substantial improvements remain urgent, especially since the ethics review environment is viewed by researchers as becoming increasingly risk-averse and focused on protecting HEIs rather than researchers or participants.
- Despite improvements in this area, one of the main problems with how ethics frameworks and processes are applied in Humanities research is that they originate from a medical/scientific context and therefore need to be further reframed and attuned in line with multi-disciplinary social-scientific concerns and the ever-changing needs of the field.
- Many ethical review committees fail to understand the realities of the field and communities to be researched, or consider the varying viewpoints or priorities of participants.
- There is a need to understand how ethics review can be placed productively at the centre of a research design, and less of an 'add-on' to projects.
- There needs to be a focus on a different kind of ethics that can produce *ethical* ethics frameworks and processes that are not distanced from the practice of research and not focused only on institutional protection.
- Current ethical approval processes require significant amounts of paperwork (such as information sheets, referral sheets, long consent forms) to be considered and completed by participants. These do not empower participants, but can instead reinforce the hierarchical power of the research institution over them; can deter participants; and can negatively impact trust between the researcher and community with which the researcher is collaborating.
- Connected to this is the hierarchical approach that the committees have towards communities. Network participants viewed research as extractive

rather than collaborative between HEIs, researchers and communities; participants are not typically considered partners. This feeds through into the way URECs approach ethics review and their understanding of research context and relationships.

- There needs to be greater focus on how URECs exercise their power, for what purposes, and with what consequences. How can ethics frameworks and processes ensure that dimensions of oppressions such as race, gender, sexuality, HIV status and disability etc. are not enforced? How can these frameworks and processes support research to ensure that there is no exploitation and that the stories of marginalised people can be told? When considering research with young people, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups, how can ethics processes and frameworks ensure support of this work and a better understanding of the needs of this kind of research?
- There needs to be a conceptual focus on how best to implement principles of justice into research relationships and how to act in everyone's best interests. There needs to be an understanding of the needs of these relationships so that we can understand how best to make them just and empowered.
- To what extent are participants protected in terms of their disclosures and what are the limits of confidentiality? It was noted that law enforcement could require the revoking of confidentiality in certain circumstances; how can HEIs and funders help to support researchers in these situations?
- Specific issues arise regarding covert research, which is often treated as 'unethical'. Yet such research has a long tradition in the Humanities and is crucial in gaining insider accounts and revealing the stories of diverse, hidden, or oppressed communities. Without covert research, it can be difficult to gain access to communities that are secretive and mistrustful of those in authority.
- Rather than there being a clear-cut divide between covert and overt research, it needs to be more consistently acknowledged that 'covert' research covers a broad range, from deliberate deception and 'undercover' research, to hybrid public-space research, which raises different ethical issues.
- Concern about the wellbeing of researchers, particularly Early-Career Researchers (henceforth ECRs), particularly 'post-field', is lacking. Researchers need to be properly supported in their work (including post-dissemination) and this needs to be a focus of ethics frameworks and processes. Researchers, particularly PGRs and ECRs, require a commitment from HEIs to provide support throughout the life-cycle of the research.
- There needs to be increased awareness of the challenges facing researchers from the development of social media and the construction of digital communities. URECs and funders require a better understanding of the ethical issues surrounding research of social media and also how social media can affect issues such as extraction from the field and engagement in covert and hybrid research.
- Researchers need a better understanding of who sits on ethics committees, and there needs to be transparency in terms of how they are constituted. This begs questions such as who is making the decisions about our work, particularly where disputes may arise within URECs? And how can URECs be radically diversified in terms of member' backgrounds and expertise?

1. The politics of research ethics

The Network was of the view that there is too much focus and emphasis on ‘do no harm’ versus actively improving situations. This applies both to the lives of the researched (particularly in situations where research is carried out on vulnerable or under-represented groups) and to research carried out on those in privileged or powerful positions. It should also be noted that terms such as ‘harm’ and ‘vulnerable’ are highly-contested.

Recommendations:

- Funders should incentivise institutional investment in URECs, particularly to encourage wider levels of expertise, greater representation of academic and lay communities, and ongoing and post-field support for researchers. HEIs should give thought to how they can improve the quality and engagement of UREC personnel and ensure that UREC positions receive fair workload allocations.
- Researchers should be encouraged to use their work more to challenge those in privileged positions and empower the victims of social misjustice rather than simply being ‘objective’ bystanders.

2. The role of ethics committees

There is wide variation in the quality of ethical committees in terms of personnel, structures, and their review processes across HEIs and funders, with a number of consequences to consider:

- a) Many ethics committees are overly prescriptive, risk-averse, and likely to reject methods considered novel, unconventional. or ‘edgy’.
- b) There is a disconnect between (1) Ethics Scholarship, (2) Ethical Approval Processes, and (3) Ethical Practice.
- c) Research ethics committees were typically seen by participants as a hurdle to overcome, rather than a resource for researchers to enhance and improve ethical behaviour. Researchers admitted labelling research projects as ‘service evaluations’ to avoid ethical review and not being entirely open or truthful when it came to completing research proposals submitted to URECs. There was perceived to be little incentive for the researcher to direct committees towards problems that the committee had not already identified. In effect, many ethical approval processes unintentionally encouraged researchers to act unethically in order to get projects approved.
- d) Ethical Review was seen as slow, bureaucratic, and cumbersome. The Network considers it inappropriate, unfair, and unethical for 3-year PhD projects to

spend 6-12 months (or more) going through ethical approval processes, which is not atypical.

- e) Researchers were often unclear of (1) the extent to which they could engage in conversation and negotiation with URECs, or (2) the support available to them. Anonymous feedback from URECS, rather than named UREC members, enhances the imbalance of power between committee and applicants.
- f) URECs were seen as being absent when urgent questions of research practice arose during fieldwork, and when researchers struggled with mental health challenges arising from their work.
- g) “What if” questions posed by URECs can hamper how research is carried out in practice in a way that is disproportionate to the likelihood of the ‘risky’ circumstances occurring. The experience of Network participants was that predictions of what may occur in the field were rarely replicated in practice.
- h) URECs were seen as having a tendency to view the balance of power between researcher and researched as being all in one direction, and in so doing underestimate (or marginalise) the power that some researched communities possess.
- i) There is a disconnect in approach between what is provided to assist academics in their teaching roles to manage their relationships with their students, and with research participants.
- j) URECs were seen as being increasingly concerned with legal compliance (e.g. regarding GDPR) and brand management or institutional risk protection rather than just ethical issues. As a result, many projects were being curtailed by URECs for legal rather than ethical reasons, or because institutional reputation is salient in the minds of UREC Chairs.
- k) URECs were seen to lack in expertise either about ‘risky’ methodologies or unusual research fields, and to veer unjustifiably into considerations of feasibility rather than ethics. For instance, committees were seen as being obsessed with numbers and sample sizes, often misunderstanding the flexibility and unpredictability of qualitative, and particularly ethnographic, research. The requirement to fill in sample sizes for observational or online research was seen as inconsequential and sometimes likely to encourage dishonest answers.
- l) In contrast to the Natural Sciences, there is a lack of authorised professional practice protocols that social scientists can call upon when considering how best to utilise particular research methods, and that URECs can draw upon when determining the ethical appropriateness of a method.
- m) Too many ethical approval portals were not set up with online research in mind, thereby focussing researcher and reviewer attention on the wrong areas.
- n) It is not always clear who makes the final decision on URECs when disputes arise, or how these decisions are ultimately made.

Recommendations for Funders and URECs:

- i. Processes and communications need to be improved so that pursuing ethical approval becomes more of an ongoing conversation rather than just an initial hurdle to be overcome.
- ii. URECs should be de-coupled in terms of both structure and personnel from decision-making bodies concerned with legal issues such as GDPR, brand, and institutional reputation management. Boundaries in terms of their role in researcher risk assessment and project feasibility also need to be more clearly demarcated.
- iii. Funders and HEIs need to be clearer from the outset about which areas within research proposals there is space to negotiate and where any red lines are that would derail a proposal.
- iv. HEIs should be incentivised to expedite time-sensitive projects (particularly at postgraduate-research level).
- v. Funders and HEIs need to work together to ensure there is easy-to-access and quickly available ongoing support for researchers when questions of research practice arise during fieldwork.
- vi. Funders and HEIs need to ensure there is easy-to-access and quickly available ongoing mental-health support for researchers when researchers encounter challenging emotional situations.
- vii. Funders and HEIs need to ensure there is easy-to-access and quickly available ongoing support and advice to respond to situations where researchers may be threatened or intimidated, either in-person or online.
- viii. URECs need to be democratised to better represent both the academic community and the lay community. Committees should therefore consider inviting where appropriate both lay-people and academics with specific experience in the field of research to allow them to reach more informed decisions and provide better support for individual projects.
- ix. URECs should consider bringing academic experts in particular methods into the review process for individual projects, including reviewers from other HEIs.
- x. Thought should be given to producing cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary data-handling protocols covering all methods (including contentious ones) that can assist researchers putting together research proposals and URECs and funders making final decisions.
- xi. URECs need to consider ways of improving the predictability and transparency of decisions (e.g. by providing access to successful ethics applications which utilise novel, unconventional, or edgy methods).
- xii. URECs should consider establishing cross-institutional networks of UREC Chairs to improve consistency and transparency, and consider ways that might promote external review of decision-making processes (including appeals).

3. Informed consent

Standardised Participant Information Sheets (PISs) and Consent Forms (CFs) are institutionally preferred approaches to obtaining consent that can often be unsuitable, such as when working with vulnerable groups, and particularly when working with individuals who are mistrustful of, or who have had negative experience of those in authority. For example, PIFs and CFs are more likely to be understood and responded to in a positive manner by those in pre-existing positions of power. There are further issues for consideration that stem from this:

- a) Written forms are inappropriate for participants for whom written language can pose particular challenges. They are also often inappropriate for gathering research in busy work settings or in public spaces where many research projects take place.
- b) Written forms, if used, rarely translate well onto smartphones, which are increasingly used, and seen by participants as more convenient, 'natural', and legitimate means of giving consent.
- c) The reliance by Funders and URECs upon PISs and CFs overlooks the diversity of more participant-centric approaches to these forms in the field by both researchers and participants.
- d) There is often a tension between the formal language required by HEIs in CFs, and the more important issue of accessibility for research participants.
- e) Committees and researchers tend to over-estimate the extent to which participants engage with, and understand, PISs and CFs before they agree to give their consent.

Recommendations:

- i. There needs to be a greater acceptance of other methods of informing participants of our research and of gaining consent, such as increased use of verbal consent.
- ii. Accessibility should be prioritised over consistency of approach or formalistic language in both PISs and CFs.
- iii. URECs need to acknowledge that informed consent is not always appropriate and can be highly contextually dependent.

4. Anonymity and protecting research participants

In this area, there is wide variation in the practices of URECs, even within the same HEI.

- a) Network participants felt that URECs are not sufficiently aware of the use of practices such as fictionalisation of aspects of respondents' identities, places, and spaces, practices that are commonly used by researchers alongside anonymisation and pseudonymisation of participant names.
- b) It is seldom acknowledged that some participants do not wish to be anonymous, and that enforcing anonymity upon them can disempower them in a way they may see as illegitimate. Conversely, in small fields, allowing some participants not to be anonymous can undermine the anonymity of others. Moreover, depending on the paradigm, too much anonymity can lead to data becoming meaningless.
- c) Anonymising places, spaces, and organisations, fictionalising research environments, and allowing participants more choice in term of how they are identified (or not) is sometimes common and necessary.

Recommendations:

- i. CFs should, where feasible, and without interfering with the anonymity of other participants, allow participants to opt out of anonymity.
- ii. Funders should avoid requiring researchers to upload and archive raw data to repositories where this has the potential to impinge upon the anonymity of, or the right to withdraw consent by, participants.
- iii. The requirements for anonymising or pseudonymising participants can be highly contextually dependent, and URECs should provide as much flexibility for researchers as possible.
- iv. Researchers should not 'over-promise' anonymity and confidentiality to participants but should instead talk participants through de-personalising processes and the reasons for them. Researchers should also clarify the difference between confidentiality and anonymity.

5. Online Research and Online Threats

The Network identified that many URECs were out-of-step with the realities faced by researchers in the area of online research, particularly in terms of how different social-media platforms operate, or the specific risks associated with online research (e.g. doxing, 'spot-lighting', or 'pile-ons').

- a) The usual tools to manage informed consent and anonymity, as well as standard practices or assumptions associated with research designs, such as sample size, often do not work when researching online communities. For example, with some types of online research, the identities of research participants may not be transparent, nor might it be clear how best to contact them, or whether they fall into a vulnerable category or not.

- b) There are also circumstances such as investigating criminal interactions online where it is not appropriate or safe to seek the consent of the original authors of material.
- c) There is also a tension between the encouragement of many HEIs that academics should engage with social media, and the risks of them engaging in online research.

Recommendations:

- i. URECs should familiarise themselves with the particular risks associated with operating in an online context and the (sometimes dangerous) communities engaged with by researchers (particularly when it comes to ECRs, postgraduates, and researchers with marginalised identities). URECs should seek guidance from researchers with experience in this area to assist in their decision-making.
- ii. Basing ethical decisions on fixed notions of what is 'public' or 'private' is not always sufficient, and is no substitute for a personal, in-depth understanding and insight about the research context. URECs should therefore not seek to apply binaries such as 'public' vs. 'private' to online research.
- iii. Where seeking informed consent is not straightforward, decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, guided by a strong rationale that considers participants' rights and sensitivities, as well as potential risks to the researcher.
- iv. HEIs should permit researchers to restrict official online information (e.g. on University or Departmental websites) where there is a risk of doxing related to their research, or consider the value of a covert or hybrid identity for the researcher.

6. Covert Fieldwork

The Network was of the view that there tends to be romanticising and sensationalising of covert research, both by URECs and researchers, which is problematic.

- a) The narrative of covert versus overt research does not account for the liminality of research, and research is too seldom thought of as being hybrid in nature. For instance, consideration is rarely given to the way in which embedded research may, over time, 'drift' towards either more covert or more overt forms of research. Additionally, some research participants will have given informed consent but others, whose experiences or interactions may form an important component of the research, may not. This is increasingly the case with the growth in methodologies such as auto-ethnography and netnography.
- b) Covert research is not always deceptive, and there also needs to be an acknowledgement that some elements of qualitative research 'craft' in

supposedly overt research could be themselves viewed as deceptive (e.g. by adopting different types of dress or ways of communicating in order to ‘fit in’, and not always directly asking the research questions that the research is seeking data on).

- c) An acknowledgement among URECs of the liminality of overt and covert research will help to reduce the ‘pariah’ status of covert research and focus attention on more important issues of deception and harm.
- d) There is a lack of consideration of the risks to the researcher when committees make decisions about granting approval for covert or hybrid research. It needs to be acknowledged that in many situations, covert research is safer for researchers, not only during the fieldwork but also post-field. This is particularly true as more research takes place online and researchers’ online identities can become compromised.

Recommendations:

- i. URECs need to recognise that actions which may be interpreted by participants as deceptive occur regularly in apparently ‘overt’ research. URECs therefore should try to avoid hard-and-fast differentiations between covert and overt qualitative research. They should instead focus on potential forms of harm (including to the researcher) that may arise from the actions of the researcher.
- ii. URECs should be aware that covert research can be ethically justifiable under certain circumstances; this is reflected in discipline-specific ethical codes of practice.
- iii. Researchers who have engaged in covert research should be part of the reviewing process for projects with a covert dimension. Thought should also be given to bringing in experts or lay-people with experience of the field in question to inform UREC decisions about whether covert methods are appropriate or necessary.
- iv. URECs permitting covert research should consider whether it is appropriate to de-brief participants or not.
- v. URECs should acknowledge that covert or hybrid researcher roles can alleviate some of the concerns relating to online threats targeted at the researcher.

7. Post-field ethics

Research fields are best defined as a set of relations rather than a space that can be left.

- a) Researchers can be most at risk at the dissemination phase of a project, post-field. Media or social-media interest in a project or a publication may be unpredictable and lead to elevated risks in terms of threats to the researcher. It

is therefore important that researcher safety is considered throughout the life-cycle of a project, including at the dissemination phase.

- b) Researchers need to consider what responsibilities and obligations they have towards participants after the project has finished and to what extent they should be empowering (or disempowering) participant communities. While in most cases we would expect that researchers adhere to a principle of debt incurred (i.e. to give something of value back to the communities that have collaborated in the research), this may not always be appropriate.

Recommendations:

- i. A post-field strategy should be planned in advance of the project's initiation and should be revisited as the research progresses to ensure appropriateness and safety for researchers and participants.
- ii. URECs should emphasise and support the need for researchers to engage in self-care and the setting of personal boundaries.
- iii. URECs should ensure that support from the HEI is available post-field to mitigate as far as possible potential vicarious traumas that arise. Thought needs to be given to providing debrief and post-fieldwork support to researchers more broadly.

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Recommended reading on principles and recommendations [*open access]

General themes arising

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