Ethical Considerations in Geography Fieldwork

Individual Investigation Home Page

When planning a geography fieldwork independent investigation, all students should consider the ethics of their fieldwork research methods.

Why are Ethical Considerations Important?

Ethical considerations are important to protect the rights and wellbeing of the people involved in research, including the researcher, and to minimise any potential harm from the research to people or the environment. Fieldwork and research involves the pursuit of truth and ethical questions and concerns should be considered at each stage of the process to help maintain integrity and honesty and avoid bias and deception.

This is a core part of good research practice and for the UK Geography A Level NEA, marks are awarded to students for showing an understanding of ethical considerations by all examining bodies. Teachers are allowed to advise students on the ethical considerations of their research, as well as on risk assessments. Students should include a summary of their ethical considerations and practice in their coursework.

What are the Principles of Ethical Research?

Informed consent

It is important that the people who participate in the research understand the purpose, aims and methods of the research and freely consent to take part. Participants should be able to withdraw from the research at any time.

Research which involves in-depth interviews with people on a sensitive topic and in which the people are identifiable in the student's report will necessitate greater ethical scrutiny and more in-depth informed consent than research which involves a short questionnaire on a non-sensitive topic in which the data is anonymised.

The standard practice for academic researchers is to provide participants with an information sheet which explains the research in clear, accessible language and to obtain consent via a consent form. Students should consider the best way to achieve informed consent for their proposed research methods.

These could include:

- An information sheet for the participants to read before taking part and consent form for participants to sign.
- A description at the top of a questionnaire outlining the research. It could state that participants consent to take part by completing the questionnaire (implied consent).
- A pre-written description of the research which is read to the participant with consent given verbally.
- A description on a webpage with an online consent form for research taking place online.

For research undertaken in Spain it is advised to have a version of all research materials in Spanish and English.

Photography is essential to all types of geographical research. Besides seeking consent from individuals, consent to photograph more general scenes, for example of street markets or domestic characteristics, should also be considered.

Anonymity and confidentiality

Students should consider whether the data they collect will be made anonymous by removing names and any other personal identifiers. Best practice is that research data should be anonymised unless there is a specific reason not to do so. Students should also consider if they will share the data collected with others (for example, other students or research participants). Students must inform participants whether their data will be anonymous and confidential.

Researcher behaviour

Students should behave in a professional manner when conducting their research. This includes adopting the role of a neutral researcher and respecting people's opinions (particularly when they may differ from their own), and people's right to not take part in the research.

Bias is antithetical to a researcher's role. We all see the world through our own lenses and the difficulty of adopting a neutral role in a time of fake news[1], declining objective journalism and increasing media activism and agenda bias should be acknowledged. The report from the UK Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools[2] found that only 2% of children and young people in the UK have the critical literacy skills they need to tell if a news story is real or fake. 'We are increasingly faced with a (mainstream) media that barely hides its prejudices' is the conclusion of *newgeography.com*[3] in its discussion of the demise of press diversity and openness in the US. To help identify fake news and reduce bias in their research, students should make efforts to use triangulation[4] and explore alternative facts, values and viewpoints within and beyond mainstream media, particularly of those they may tend to disagree with[5].

There are many ethical considerations to be taken into account in making use of photography in geographical research. These include image selection, accurate representation, image cropping and manipulation as well as subject consent mentioned above. The researcher should adopt techniques that avoid filtering images based on prior ideas and opinions. A mosaic of 'ordinary' images of the same feature taken over time rather than selecting the 'best' one can assist in a more objective and honest analysis and help identify contrary evidence.

Students should consider how they present themselves when undertaking the research. For example, they could wear a badge to identify themselves and their role as a researcher and avoid wearing sloganed or 'statement' clothing.

The safety of the researcher is also an important ethical consideration. Students should consider their safety and ensure appropriate steps are taken to minimise risk. This should be included as part of the risk assessment.

Environmental impact of research

Students should consider the potential environmental impact of their research. This could include considering whether it is necessary to remove samples from the natural environment for further analysis in the laboratory or classroom and how they will minimise any harm or damage caused to the environment by undertaking their research. Students should also consider consent to access their research study sites.

Data collection

Where sampling is used to study people or places, *random* or *systematic* techniques may be combined with *stratified* sampling to help avoid bias and to ensure that data collected is a fair representation of the whole *population* studied.

Random sampling avoids bias in selecting specific people or places. Systematic sampling collects data at regular intervals e.g. every 50 metres along a transect line, or from every tenth person. Stratified sampling divides the

target population into its *representative* groups or categories, e.g. different age ranges, or the upper, middle and lower stages of a river long profile.

Data interpretation and storage

Students should process, analyse and interpret their data in a fair, transparent and representative manner. Opinions expressed should be founded on honestly gathered data, supported by theory and fact. Data should never be falsified, made up or manipulated to deceive. It is important for students to understand that their research does not have to convincingly prove or disprove their hypotheses and that research in the real world is often messy, with unexpected and contradictory results.

Students should be conscious of cultural and cognitive biases when interpreting their data. Our assumptions about other cultures may bias our perceptions of them and this can impact on objectivity, including issues of stigma, stereotyping, discrimination and ethnocentrism. A cognitive bias is a systematic error in thinking that affects the decision and judgments that people make - see this infographic from *Business Insider*[6] to find out more.

Students should practice the principles of good data management and consider how they will anonymise, file, label and store data securely. This includes how data will be stored when in the field, when and where this data will be transferred, deletion of files on mobile devices, a systematic way of versioning files, and a system for backing up data.

Ethical Research in Practice

Human Geography Enquiry Example

Example Method	Ethical considerations
Questionnaire (e.g. on cultural regeneration in El Raval)	• Questions are written in clear, accessible and neutral language and are free from bias. • Questionnaire only includes questions/topics which are relevant to the research. • Questionnaire is produced in English and Spanish to ensure participants understand the questions. • No personal data is collected (unless there is a justifiable reason), i.e. it is anonymous.

- Decide in advance whether the data will be shared with any other students, i.e. whether it will be confidential.
- A statement is produced to include at the top of the questionnaire to obtain informed consent, e.g. *This research is being undertaken for my Geography A Level Coursework. The aim of the research is <insert aims>. This questionnaire does not ask for any personal information. Your answers will not be shared with anyone else and the data will be stored securely. You are free to stop and withdraw at any time. If you are happy to take part, then please complete the questionnaire below.*
- Student behaves in a professional and respectful manner while conducting the research. Potential participants are not pressured into taking part.
- Student has considered how they will identify themselves, e.g. by wearing a badge or by introducing themselves as a student researcher.
- Students are always with at least one/two others in order to ensure their safety, have an emergency contact phone number and only conduct their research during daylight hours.
- Questionnaires are stored securely in the student's hotel room. Data is typed up and stored electronically within one week of the fieldwork with a clear filing system. A back-up is made of the data.
- Data is analysed in a fair and representative manner, free from cultural and cognitive bias.

Physical Geography Enquiry Example

Example Method	Ethical considerations
Beach profiles and sediment analysis	• Check access requirements to the beaches and obtain permission if required. In Spain there is public access to all beaches. • Plan timings of research to avoid disruption to other beach users, particularly relevant in summer. Maintain a respectful distance to

other beach users. Explain what you're doing if asked by members of the public.
- Do all analysis of pebbles on the shingle beach. Only remove sand samples from sandy beaches if essential to your research project, and return the sand to the beach after analysis.
- Minimise any impact to the environment: take all equipment away, do not litter and avoid trampling vegetation.
- Students are always with at least one/two others and have an emergency contact phone number.
- Research data is stored securely in the student's hotel room. Data is typed up and stored electronically within one week of the fieldwork with a clear filing system. A back-up is made of the data.
- Data is analysed in a fair and representative manner, free from cognitive bias.

Foot Notes

[1] Fake news is commonly defined as:

- untrue, false, or made up information, presented as fact;
- true information misrepresented, misused or misapplied to paint a false picture of reality;
- false or misleading news maintained by omitting factually true contrary information;
- misleading news choices with important news stories ignored or hidden if they do not fit the news provider's agenda bias.

[2] Commission on Fake News and the Teaching of Critical Literacy Skills in Schools (13.6.2018) Fake news and critical literacy: final report.

[3] Joel Kotkin, NewGeography.com 21.10.2019 Media Meltdowns and Political Polarization.

[4] Triangulation is a qualitative research strategy to test validity of data through the convergence of information from mulitple sources (Patton, 1999).

[5] A current example at the time of preparing this article (30 December 2019) is the misleading reporting of the effects of climate change on the Victoria Falls. Two left-of-centre mainstream media select or omit different

data to arrive at contrasting headlines: The Guardian 7.12.2019 Victoria Falls dries to a trickle after worst drought in a century and El Pais 29.12.2019 (translated from Spanish) The False Death of the Victoria Falls.

[6] Business Insider 15.10.2019 60 cognitive biases that screw up everything we do.

Further information

Many human geographers adhere to the ethical codes of the British Sociological Association https://www.britsoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf or the Association of Social Anthropologists https://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.html

Sources

This web page is informed by the UK Edexcel Examiners report 2019 and the specifications of the UK A Level Geography Examination Boards.

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