

5.11 Consideration of the ethical dimensions of field research

It is a requirement of your fieldwork investigation to consider the ethical aspects of how carrying out your project may impact on people and/or the environment. Your job is to identify and manage such impacts. This should be an integral element of high quality data collection and design.

The most common ethical dilemmas in human geography are around participation, consent and the safeguarding and confidentiality of information.

In physical geography, the main ethical considerations are around consent and access to study sites and potential damage. In most instances, careful planning should effectively reduce the impacts and effects to a minimal level. This could be done as part of a risk assessment.

Students have a responsibility not only towards others and the environment but to take care of themselves both physically and mentally when carrying out their research.

Why are the ethical aspects important?

The AQA mark scheme includes ethical considerations as part of Area 4: 'show an understanding of the ethical dimension of field research'. There are other important aspects of ethical consideration.

- It protects the rights of the individuals and communities that are affected by the research, as well as the environment where the research is taking place in.
- It meets the growing public demand for accountability, for example, the 2018 GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation).
- It shows that you are serious about your investigation and want to carry it out properly, professionally and correctly.

Some principles of ethical behaviour

Several researchers recognise the following principles of ethical behaviour.

- 1 *Do no harm*: Safeguard against anything that could harm participants or the environment in your study.
- 2 *Privacy and anonymity*: No identifying information about an individual should be revealed. Seek permission from participants.
- 3 *Confidentiality*: Information collected should not be given to anyone else.
- 4 *Informed consent*: Participants are informed of the nature and extent of the study.

- 5 *Truthfulness and accuracy in reporting data*: Data will not be created or falsified.
- 6 *Intrusiveness*: Remain a neutral researcher.
- 7 *Data interpretation*: Researchers should use their data to fairly represent what they see and hear. Don't misinterpret the data collected to present a picture that is not supported by the evidence.

Ethical considerations

Usually ethical considerations will form part of a methodology but in conclusions and/or evaluation you should also consider how it might affect the results. For example, assumptions about other cultures or about a particular cultural group may bias our perception. They can impact on objectivity including issues of stigma, stereotyping, and even discrimination.

The amount that you write will be dependent on the nature of the research. Generally, a paragraph will be sufficient to explain your actions and reasoning to the reader, although it may be longer for a human-rather than a physical-based piece of work.

Example of ethical practice: interview

For face-to-face interviews, participants (respondents) can be informed of your ethical planning at the start. Table 22 is an extract from notes for that could be used at the start of the interview.

Table 22 An introduction to a face-to-face interview.

Objectives/ timing	Ethical brief
Introduction (3 minutes)	<p>Nature of research and how it will be used:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This research study forms part of an independent review of X. ● Recording will take place for recollection purposes and to obtain quotations. ● Anything said will be treated as confidential and anonymous. Your personal data will not be passed on to anyone else. ● Think of this as an informal chat. I'm interested in your own reflections on X and how you feel about the planned project at Y. ● The interview should take around half an hour. ● I am happy to send you a copy of the final research when it is completed if you want me to.

Example of ethical practice: physical geography

Table 23 is an example of ethical considerations from a physical geography investigation.

Table 23 The ethical considerations of a physical geography investigation. Source: Field Studies Council (2018).

Method	Ethical and socio-political considerations
Clast analysis (axis a length and shape of sediment – Powers Index of Roundness) on storm beach	Consider access to the site, and gain permission by any relevant land owners. No beach material is to be taken away from the site. Ensure that any trampling or equipment, e.g. tape measures, ranging poles, does not disturb any of the vegetation that may be present on the storm beach.

Evaluating the ethical issues

Below are some extracts from an NEA where a student is writing about ethical considerations for a proposed questionnaire. Look at the highlighted sections. Those in green are examples of good practice, those in blue are more questionable. Take a few minutes to review and work out how it could be improved.

When designing my questionnaire I was aware of asking questions that could be seen as too invasive, so I asked my friend to take a look first.

My pilot study revealed that people thought I might work for the council or even the police so I made sure that I introduced this as being a personal and private piece of study research.

I showed people my college ID card to demonstrate my age.

I gave people my personal mobile number if they had any follow-up comments that they wanted to talk to me about.

I asked people if I could take a photo of them and record comments on my mobile phone.

I told participants that I would post images of them on Twitter as part of my research.

I removed the stones from the beach and took them home so that measurements would be easier.

I was very careful not to damage the sand dune plants and to reduce my trampling impacts.

My progress

Write a short paragraph which covers your ethical considerations. You can then use this directly in your fieldwork investigation.