Association of Christians in Counselling and Linked Professions

professional standards authority accredited register

Research Ethics Policy and Procedures

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Introduction

Although empirical research has been woven into the history of counselling and psychotherapy, with many of its main founders such as Freud, Rogers and Beck all carrying out research, research is often a topic of some discomfort and anxiety for practising counsellors (e.g., Moran, 2011). Undoubtedly, research can be a demanding process, particularly for the novice, but it is also a creative opportunity to contribute to the field of counselling and psychotherapy, and build on, or indeed, challenge, what is already known.

Counsellors, and other linked professionals, are often already cognisant of the need to be attentive to issues of ethics, and this knowledge can be used effectively, with some adaption, in the research process. Thus, this research ethics policy is intended to support members of the Association of Christians in Counselling and Linked Professions (ACC) in the research process, with a particular focus on how to conduct research ethically, and legally. The appendices contain some examples of documentation that can be copied and adapted by researchers.

This document details the research ethics policy of the Association of Christians in Counselling and Linked Professions for its members and staff, and any external researchers who undertake research with ACC staff or members, or research carried out with ACC data (but excludes routine, work-based, monitoring activities by ACC staff). It outlines general guidance for ethical issues that may arise in research, but is not intended to be exhaustive. Comments and feedback on the policy are welcomed via the ACC for the development of future versions.

In this context, 'research' refers to the systematic gathering and analysis of data to contribute to knowledge, theory, or practice, whether collected using online, observational, or direct methods.

Ethics and research

In the same way that there is a need for ethical practice in counselling and other helping relationships, ethical issues should be considered in research. Ethics should form part of the research process, from the beginning with the development of the research question, through working with participants,

processing and analysing their data, to reporting and disseminating the research findings.

As well as enabling researchers to work with participants with respect and dignity, and keeping them free from harm, research ethical guidelines and principles can enable a researcher to navigate any ethical dilemmas that might arise in the research process. At each stage of the research process, it is vital to reflect on what the potential ethical implications are of the various research choices and practicalities. These guidelines serve as a starting place to support ethical research.

Principles

The Association of Christians in Counselling and Linked Professions is committed to ensuring that any research activities undertaken by its members and staff adhere to the highest ethical standards and are in compliance with any relevant legal requirements.

Research should be carried out with the following principles in mind:

- *Respect and dignity* - towards all people and groups, valued as made in the image of God, irrespective of background, religion, race, sexuality, and other protected characteristics, and in line with anti-discriminatory and equality practice and laws.
- *Autonomy* - facilitation of research participants' autonomy, including providing sufficient information to assist informed consent.
- *Transparency* – openness and clarity in all research relationships and processes, including transparency about limits of confidentiality and obligations of disclosure where relevant, for example.
- *Integrity* – honesty and thoroughness in all research relationships and processes.
- *Humility* – in consideration of issues of power, data gathering, knowledge production, for example.

All research conducted in the name of the Association of Christians in Counselling and Linked Professions should conform with The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Covenants on Human Rights, UN General Assembly (December

1984). In addition, research activities should also adhere to any other relevant professional guidelines and legal requirements. This includes systematic research using publicly available data, visual or text-based data, existing documents, or archival data, for example, as well as interview or questionnaire data.

Under normal circumstances, the ACC does not support research undertaken directly with or on animals (with the potential exception of research on counselling approaches which includes animals, such as animal assisted therapy).

This policy is underpinned by the Association's vision, values, mission and ethos, details of which are available via the ACC website, and should be read and understood in the context of that, as well as other relevant policies such as the ACC Ethics and Practice (also available on the website).

Risk

Prior to carrying out research, a risk assessment should be made to identify any potential risks and outline how these will be managed. Whilst it is not possible to cover all eventualities, a risk assessment should be thorough and consider risk in a number of areas. The table below can be used to underpin a risk assessment, particularly if completing a research proposal for submission to an institution or organisation. Under normal circumstances, research would not include the use of deception but should be carried out in line with the principle of transparency.

ETHICAL RISK ASSESSMENT				
What risks might occur in your research, and at what level? *Circle or underline a category to show your estimate for risk in each of the sections.*				
Physical	none	minimal	more than minimal	unsure
Psychological (emotional, behavioural)	none	minimal	more than minimal	unsure
Sociological (employability, reputation, etc.)	none	minimal	more than minimal	unsure
Loss of confidentiality	none	minimal	more than minimal	unsure

Deception (explain)	none	minimal	more than minimal	unsure
Other (explain)	none	minimal	more than minimal	unsure
Where there is deception, other risks, more than minimal or uncertain/unsure risk, please comment below on what the specific issues are likely to be and how you will manage those.				
Risk assessment comments:				

Table 1: Risk Assessment.

Consent

Informed consent is foundational to ethical research. All research participants should be enabled to make an informed decision about whether to participate in the proposed research or not and be helped to make informed consent.

In practice, this means providing participants with sufficient information prior to participation about what participation will include, providing them with an opportunity to ask questions and withdraw consent if they wish to. The onus is on the researcher to foresee, to a good enough degree, what potential advantages and disadvantages taking part in the research there may be; what costs and benefits of taking part, whether financial, emotional, physical, timewise or other.

To assist with gaining informed consent, it is usual to provide prospective participants with an information sheet, including information on, for example, what the research question is, why they are being asked to participate, what participation will involve, any costs and benefits to them, and any risks of harm, what will happen to their data and the time involved in participation. It is usual practice for participants to provide written, signed consent to participate.

Information is also given on participants' rights to withdraw and any practical limitations of that. For example, a participant may have the right to withdraw their consent at any time without giving a reason. However, participants should also be informed that after data analysis has begun, whilst every effort will be made to withdraw their consent, and their data, it may be impractical to withdraw all data once data analysis reaches a certain stage.

Information should also be given about who to contact for more information or in the event of a complaint or concern, as well as what will happen to the final results of the research. Under normal circumstances, research participants can have the opportunity to raise an issue or complaint with either the ACC and/or the organisation under which the research is taking place (the education institution or workplace, for example).

Also, to mitigate risk, particularly if researching a sensitive topic, the information sheet would usually have information about where a participant can seek appropriate help should the research process evoke difficult feelings (such as where to look for a counsellor or pastoral support). It would not usually be the researcher's responsibility to provide that support but provide information about where the support can be accessed.

Examples of participant information sheets, participant consent forms and debrief information sheets are included in the Appendices, as well as an example of an interview schedule which can be given to participants one week prior to the research interview.

Confidentiality

All research data should, under normal circumstances, be kept confidential and anonymous. All raw data, interview transcriptions and any other research data would usually be processed and kept securely using password or biometrically protected devices. Researchers must take reasonable steps to ensure there is not a data breach.

Although confidentiality and anonymity overlap considerably, they are not the same, and care needs to be made to ensure both. For example, changing any potential details that may identify a participant ensures anonymity as well as confidentiality potentially.

Additionally, there may be instances in which it is important to take further steps to protect anonymity, particularly in small communities in which participants may be known to each other. Within Christian counselling circles, for example, only a few details would be needed to potentially identify a research participant.

Researchers must adhere to any exceptions to confidentiality, and legal obligations to disclose, for example, in the exceptional circumstances of an imminent safeguarding instance. Research participants should be given written information about the confidentiality and the limits to confidentiality.

Research and the Data Protection Act (2018)

As well as adhering to research ethics, it is important to be aware of any legal requirements when conducting research.

Whilst there are some exemptions within the Data Protection Act (DPA; 2018) that relate to data processed for research purposes, personal data gathered for research purposes are still subject to the DPA.

Data may be:

Anonymous = there were and are no identifying details associated with the data and there is no method of tracing the data back to the participants.

Anonymised = all identifying details have been removed, either permanently or temporarily.

Pseudonymised = all identifying details have been removed and participants have been given a pseudonym or code. The data can be linked to the specific participants if required.

All personal data are subject to the DPA, but *anonymous* and *permanently anonymised* data are not. Most research involves processing data that would be able to be linked to a person's identity. For example, a code might be used to analyse the data but the researcher knows who that data belongs to and keeps a record of contact details for the duration of the research in case there are any questions or practicalities to arrange. In this instance, this would be pseudonymised data.

According to the Data Protection Act (2018), personal data means:

> any information relating to an identified or identifiable nature person ('data subject'); an identifiable natural person is one who can be identified,

> directly or indirectly, in particular by reference to an identifier such as a name, an identification number, location data, an online identifier or to one or more factors specific to the physical, physiological, genetic, mental, economic, cultural or social identity of that natural person (Data Protection Act, 2018, 2018; p.3).

Thus, pseudonymised data are not anonymous.

Researchers will also usually be subject to the data protection policies and procedures of their respective academic institutions or workplaces.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is the regulator for data compliance in the UK. All researchers are responsible to ensure they comply with any relevant UK law regarding data processing and to consider if they need to be registered with the ICO as a Data Controller for research purposes. Usually, if you are a student in Higher Education, you do not have to register with the ICO for research purposes as the university or college has a Data Protection Officer, but it is important to check this with your learning institution.

In line with the DPA, research participants must be given sufficient information about the processing and storage of their data. This usually involves giving written information including a 'privacy notice' which outlines, for example, your details as a researcher, the purpose for collecting the data, the lawful basis for processing data (this is usually 'consent'), who will see the data, how long it will be stored for, and the right to withdraw. The data privacy notice must also give information about who the data controller is and the contact details for the Data Protection Officer. This would normally be included in the participant information sheet.

For more information about what to include in a privacy notice, the ICO offers helpful guidance.

Additionally, counselling research may involve processing 'special category data' (DPA: 2018). According to the DPA, special category includes data relating to, 'racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation' (Article 9; DPA, 2018). The ICO argues that processing of this category of data needs 'more protection because it is sensitive' (ICO). Thus, researchers need to be aware of the

type of data they are processing and take care to keep data secure, and maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Research ethics and responsibilities

ACC member or staff researchers are required to belong to a relevant professional organisation, and adhere to the relevant complaints policy and procedures, for the duration of the research process.

Researchers also have a responsibility to immediately notify their research supervisor (if one is assigned), and any other relevant personnel, if any ethical or legal issues arise, including any data breaches, or if there are any significant changes to the research. And researchers are responsible to follow any guidance offered by their supervisor, and the ACC, where relevant.

External researchers carrying out research with ACC members or staff are required to belong to a relevant professional or academic organisation that has a complaints policy and ethical guidelines, and to adhere to those. Under normal circumstances, permission to carry out research with ACC members or staff would not be given without the necessary support of adherence to appropriate ethical guidelines and a complaints policy.

Working with minors and vulnerable groups

Researchers must consider issues of safeguarding, particularly when working with vulnerable participants or minors, that is, adults who legally are designated as vulnerable, or individuals who are under 18 years of age.

In the UK, a vulnerable person is someone who is receiving certain services (e.g., nursing or supported living) as a result of having a condition (such as a mental illness or reduction in physical or mental capacity). For more information, see the UK Police Act (1997) which defines what is legally meant as a vulnerable adult.

Generally, if the research involves working with 16–17 years old, consent is required from both the parent/carer and the young person. Arguably, a 16- or 17-year-old can be considered to be ‘Gillick competent’, that is able to give their own

consent by virtue of being sufficiently competent to understand what is involved in the research. This is a concept originally developed within a health context (e.g., see NHS *Children and Young People: Consent to Treatment*) and research supervision should be sought when seeking to work with such young people.

If the project involves working with anyone aged 15 or younger, consent is required from the parent/carer.

Researchers should consider whether they need to have a current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check specifically for the research activity with either vulnerable adults or minors.

Funding

In some instances, research may be funded by an external organisation or workplace. Sometimes, such a third party has an agenda connected to the research. Researchers should be transparent with participants about the presence of any financial or other agendas.

The provider of funding for a research or other project:

- should not prejudice the outcome of the research or project, or curtail the publication of results
- should be asked, where appropriate to declare any interests that might conflict with the work of the ACC or might be prejudicial to the outcome of a project or might undermine the integrity of the ACC
- should not impose any terms or conditions to the funding that are inconsistent with the ACC's core values or be potentially unethical to participants and/or researchers.

Conducting research online & internet-mediated research

Increasingly qualitative and quantitative research is being conducted online. This offers widening opportunities but also carries additional ethical implications.

Online research may refer to research that takes data (textual or visual) *from the internet* that is publicly available and gathered initially for other purposes (e.g., a thematic analysis of blogs on a particular topic), or research that is carried out *through the internet* (e.g., via online videoing or online polls, surveys, etc).

It is recognised that as technology changes there may be additional ethical complexities to consider, and the following guidelines are not exhaustive. For more information, resources, such as *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods* or *Doing Qualitative Research Online*, can be helpful.

Research using existing data obtained from the internet

Publicly available textual, audio, or visual data from the internet may be used in research in some instances. From a data protection perspective, any personal data gathered for research purposes from the internet is still subject to the Data Protection Act (2018).

However, thought needs to be given as to whether a person's data, although readily available online, would have a reasonable expectation of privacy. For example, on social media sites, most people restrict who sees their data to friends, contacts, and the like. Therefore, it would be unethical (and potentially a breach of the Data Protection Act) to assume that someone would give their permission for their social media data to be used in research. Data from social media and other sites can be shared unethically or illegally by others. Therefore, just because data are freely available online, it does not mean it is legal or ethical to use such data for research purposes.

Also, by using data from some online sources for research purposes, you may be breaching the terms and conditions of those websites or apps. Therefore, research using pre-existing online data needs consideration in the light of relevant law and ethics.

Using online methods for research

In recent years, it has become more common to use online methods and online videoing for carrying out interviews and surveys.

Pragmatically, a distinction can be made between using an online video platform such as Zoom or Skype to conduct interviews, and other internet-mediated research methods such as using chat rooms, web forums and social media.

Although there can be overlap between the two approaches, under normal circumstances, it is only in the latter scenario that data are created online, whereas in the former case, the interview data may be recorded but not necessarily kept online or available to others online.

Using online video platforms for interviews

Research can be conducted by communicating with prospective participants through email and conducting interviews online through the use of Skype, Zoom or other online video platforms. In this case, electronic communication is used for communication only to set up the interview, and the interview itself, whilst carried out online, does not result in data being created online but is recorded and used offline.

This is a common scenario for many researchers, particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic. It allows researchers to recruit participants more widely and can be convenient and practical for both the researcher and participant.

From an ethical perspective, researchers need to use video platforms that ideally have end-to-end encryption, and they need to consider the ethical implications of conducting interviews online. For example, information should be made clear prior to the interview as to what actions to take if the online platform fails or the internet connection fails.

Also, it is the researcher's responsibility to carry out confidential interviews in an appropriate room in which the interview cannot be overheard, preferably with headphones to ensure the participant's contribution cannot be overheard if there is some likelihood of being heard.

Researchers are also responsible to ensure that their participants have been given appropriate guidance on where the participants carry out the interview, e.g., in a closed room, to limit the potential for distress in front of others or confidential material being overheard.

Audio and/or video recordings of online interviews are to be kept confidential and secure, and only used for the stated purposes as per the research question.

Researchers also need to consider how to support a participant should they become distressed in the process of working with them online.

Internet-mediated research

The British Psychological Society defines internet-mediated research (IMR) as 'any research involving remote acquisition of data from or about human participants using the Internet and its associated technologies' (2021; p.6). They also make a helpful distinction between 'reactive' data that are created with participants online, e.g., through online chats or surveys, and non-reactive data which refers to data already available online and collected without participant-involvement.

Research that is internet-mediated needs to consider any ethical and legal implications in researching online; for example, the ethics of re-using data for research purposes without the author's knowledge, the potential risks and benefits of text-based approaches in which the participant's reaction to a research question cannot be immediately seen or fully understood, or the legality of using data from internet sources.

Resources

There are many helpful research resources available online and in the literature. Organisations such as the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), as well as the UK Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) have helpful sections on research on their websites.

References

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Appendices

Appendix A = Example of a Participant Information Sheet

Appendix B = Example of a Participant Consent Form

Appendix C = Example of a Participant Debrief Sheet

Appendix D = Example of an Interview Schedule

APPENDIX A - Research Participant Information Sheet Example

The participant information sheet should contain detailed information about the research. This enables prospective participants to give *informed consent*.

Headings can be amended in line with particular requirements of the research or stated in other terms.

Include page numbers in the format of 'Page 1 of 2'.

Research question/title

Researcher's name and contact details

Invitation

What is the purpose of the study?

Why have I been approached?

Participant recruitment details

Do I have to take part?

What will happen if I take part?

Specify the practicalities of the research

What will it involve?

Time commitment, any travelling, resources required, etc.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

For example, risk of difficult feelings being evoked, confidentiality may not be absolute in some types of research (e.g., action research)

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

For example, an opportunity to add to the knowledge on a topic, to have a chance to discuss an experience etc.

Will my data and personal information be kept anonymous and confidential?

What will happen to the data I provide?

Be specific about what data you are collecting and what will happen to that data.

For example, you may wish to copy, paste and amend some of the information about data on the participant consent form. Make sure that all information is consistent in all the paperwork.

Who has reviewed the study?

How do I raise an issue or make a complaint if I am concerned?

Provide the name, position, and contact details of the person to contact if they wish to raise a concern or complaint.

You may wish to include a sentence such as, 'If you would like to raise a concern or complaint, you are welcome to discuss those with myself using the contact details above, and/or you can contact the [role of who to contact], [insert name] directly by email on [insert email].

What code of ethics or ethical framework does the researcher have to abide by?

Who do I contact for further information or if I have questions?

Thank you for taking time to consider participation.

Researcher's name and signature [insert]

Date [insert]

APPENDIX B - Research Participant Consent Form Example

Title of research dissertation [insert]

Researcher name [insert]

Researcher's contact details [insert email address]

Participant name/participant identification number [insert]

I [insert participant name] give consent for my research data to be used by [insert researcher's name] for the purposes of [insert].

I understand that my interview [or other data] will be audio recorded and subsequently transcribed [amend as appropriate specifying what data will be collected and what will be done to the data].

I understand that my identity will remain anonymous and any personal identifying information will be altered in the final research in order to protect my anonymity, and all data will be dealt with confidentially. Any identifying details will be kept separate from the final disseminated research.

I understand that in the rare event of extreme circumstances, such as imminent risk of harm, and/or where there is a legal obligation to disclose (e.g., for safeguarding purposes), confidentiality may be broken.

I understand that my data, such as a transcript of the interview, may be seen by [insert, e.g., University or other institutional examiners, etc., where relevant]. I understand that excerpts of my data from the research may be included in the results of the research using pseudonyms to protect my identity.

I consent to material from this study being used for publication and/or presentation (e.g., at conferences and seminars) with the protection of my identity.

I am aware that I can stop my participation in the research at any time and withdraw my consent without giving reason or explanation up [insert time frame, e.g., until two weeks after the interview], after which transcription and analysis will begin. Whilst every effort will be taken to remove all my data if consent is withdrawn at any point after, I understand that it is usually impracticable to

withdraw after in-depth analysis of the data and submission/publication of the research.

I understand that upon completion of the research the audio recording [or other raw data] of the research will be securely destroyed [or other arrangements for secure destruction of data].

I understand that all reasonable lengths will be taken to keep all data secure.

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet dated [insert] for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant's name [insert]

Participant's signature [insert]

Date [insert][1]

Researcher's name [insert]

Researcher's signature [insert]

Date [insert]

[1] The Researcher should keep the original signed form and a copy be given to the participant.

APPENDIX C - Participant Debrief Information Example

After data have been collected, it is common to have a brief time to debrief/check in with the participant. This is usually a brief time to check that the participant is not unduly affected by the research process – to check that they are OK, to see if they have any questions, and to briefly remind them of their right to withdraw and where to go if they have concerns.

You may also wish to include a short section on amendments in which you advise them that if they wish to make amendments to what they have said, they can amend their responses, up to a fortnight or week after the interview, for example. This may not be necessary or practical for all types of research, particularly if you are completing the research module in one academic year.

There may also be other brief notes you wish to include in the post-interview sheet.

Ask the participant to sign the sheet, keeping the original signed copy and offer to provide them with a copy (either at a later date, e.g., scanned, through the post, or simply ask them to sign two copies).

This information sheet will vary, depending on the type and context of the research, but minimally should include:

Research title [insert]

Researcher's name [insert]

Thank you for taking part [insert further details]

Right to withdraw reminder [insert further details as per the consent form]

Amendments to the data [insert further details if relevant]

Concerns/complaints [insert further details stating who they can contact in the event of concerns and complaints, and that person's position and contact details]

Research participant's name

Research participant's signature

Date

Researcher's name

Researcher's signature

Date

APPENDIX D - Research Interview Schedule with Prompts Example

Interview questions and prompts are likely to vary, depending on the topic but you may wish to provide your prospective research participants with information about the type and nature of the questions you will ask.

Research Interview Schedule with Prompts

Research question [insert]

Researcher's name [insert]

Introduction [insert a brief introduction: thanks for participation, we will have approximately 45 minutes to explore the topic of… I would like to remind you that everything you say is confidential. Do you have any questions before we start? etc]

Interview questions & prompts:

How have you experienced spiritual growth/change?

- Can you tell me some more about that particular time or season of growth?
- What did you experience?
- How did this impact your life at the time?
- Were there any challenging aspects to this?
- What, if anything, did others notice about you that had changed?

What enabled that growth?

- Were there particular things or people that facilitated your growth?
- Were there any things that held back the sense of growth?

How has that growth impacted your life?

Tell me how it has affected your faith?

What impact has it had on your relationships?

What has been the main change for you?

Thank you for your participation.