**Dept of Psychological Sciences. Code of conduct for field research**

Field research is research conducted away from Birkbeck- either in participants’ homes or in other institutions- hospitals, places of work, in the community. Anyone in the dept conducting field research must familiarize themselves with this document and follow this code of conduct. Members of staff are responsible for doing this themselves. Students and researchers should do this as part of training/induction from their supervisor or manager. They should be given a copy of this document and asked to read it. This should be followed by a discussion of the implications for their study.

These guidelines are primarily geared towards interviews conducted in participant’s homes. Adapt them accordingly if doing research in other institutions. Special regulations apply for conducting research with children/young people. Discuss these with your supervisor when designing your study.

In addition any research conducted within the jurisdiction of the dept must have received ethics approval through the dept ethics approval process or when necessary through the NHS ethics system. This should ensure that, inter alia, informed consent and confidentiality are addressed.

**Risk assessment**

When designing your study you should conduct a risk assessment:

What are the potential hazards involved?

What is the risk of something going wrong?

What can you do to help protect yourself and those taking part in the research?

**Sensitive topics**

Think about your research topic. Is it possible that participants will find it uncomfortable or distressing? If this is a possibility, think about how you can reduce the chances of this happening and what you will do if it does. See below for more on this.

**Location**

Think about where the interviews will take place. Do you feel comfortable going there? If you have doubts, what can you do? Consider changing the venue or using a taxi or driving to get you there. If you do not know an area, discuss it with your supervisor/manager, take some time to familiarize yourself with and good routes to get there. In general it is better to do interviews during daylight hours.

**Proportionality**

Risks taken should be proportionate to the task. The more experienced and qualified the researcher, the greater the risks that can be taken. Thus e.g. while it may be appropriate for a phd student or postdoc to conduct interviews with clinical populations and on sensitive topics, it is not appropriate for undergraduate students to do this. The undergraduate student is learning research methods and this is best done with studies that do not raise additional complications. And the undergraduate researcher does not have the necessary experience to deal with issues arising from sensitive topics.

**Preparation**

Speak to participants on the phone as part of arranging interviews- this gives the opportunity to get to know the person and consider whether there are any perceived risks involved in proceeding.

**Buddy system**

Most social research is conducted as a lone worker and requires a buddy system to be set up. Your buddy can be a family member or friend or fellow student.

You must inform your buddy prior to every home visit or interview conducted in the field. You will provide the buddy with the date when each interview will be conducted, the start/end time of each interview and the address of each participant’s home. You should contact the buddy at the end of each interview to inform him/her that you have left the interview site. If the buddy does not hear from you after an agreed time, he/she will call you. If there no answer, he/she should seek help (e.g. report to the police).

**Conducting the interview**

Consider how you are going to dress when visiting the participant. Dress casually to avoid appearing ‘official’; Informal dress will generally be expected but be sufficiently smart that you demonstrate respect for the participant, showing that you are visiting as a professional.

Make sure that you carry your mobile and it is fully charged and switched on. It may be useful to have it on vibrate during the interview.

Try to ensure you are on time. If you are stuck in traffic, ring the participant, if you can, to let them know you may be late and ensure it is still convenient to see them.

If you have arranged a visit but no one answers the door when you call, telephone the participant. They may be inside but not want to answer the door. They may reply and say that they forgot and have gone to the shops. See if they might be back soon, if you can meet elsewhere, or if you can re-schedule. If there is no response to your telephone call wait a few minutes and then post a ‘Sorry I missed you’ A5 card through the door. Sometimes it’s a good idea to go and find a café and then pop back and hopefully catch them in. **Never ‘hang around’ if you feel unsafe.**

Establishing rapport with the participant will have begun with your initial telephone call. On first meeting, be friendly and approachable. Speak confidently and make eye contact. Use your first name and their first name and break the ice with general chat about your journey or something positive that you noticed in the area on the way to the house.

Try to interview the participant on their own, as it is only their answers you are interested in. If another family member or friend is there, see if it is possible for them to go to another room.

A good interview is one where the respondent feels at ease and doesn’t feel they need to give a ‘right’ or ‘expected’ response. You should aim to be objective and accepting rather than approving or disapproving.

If the home environment is chaotic or the participant is busy, try and conduct as much of the interview as possible. However, if you feel the data will be compromised, you may need to end the interview and try to re-arrange another visit if you think the individual is likely to agree to one. It is acceptable to ask for a TV to be turned off if the participant is alone, or to ask if there is somewhere else that you can sit if someone else is watching TV.

At the end of the interview. Even if the participant has been quite negative about the interview, try to remain positive towards them.

**Your personal safety during the interview**

Try and ensure you are sitting near the door if you are feeling uneasy, this will enable you to leave quickly if you need to. However, never put yourself in a position where you feel vulnerable.

Remain alert and neutral throughout the visit and be aware of any environmental changes such as friends entering the household or family members coming home from work. Be aware of changes in the respondent’s mood and also relationships within the household.

If you feel uneasy about your safety make an excuse and leave the house e.g. say you have left some equipment at the office or, if you have been in the household a while, try explaining that you aren’t able to continue a home visit over a given time period. If you feel in imminent danger leave the equipment and house immediately. There’s a big difference between feeling a little awkward with someone and feeling unsafe…if in doubt leave!

Keep your purse/keys/mobile in the same room with you all the time you are in the house. A discrete way to do this might be to wear a small bag around your waist or across your shoulders. Or keep them in your pockets.

**Consent and confidentiality**

Participants must be given sufficient information to give informed consent to participate. They must sign a consent form to confirm this. You must respect this confidentiality by not divulging personal information to anyone else outside the immediate research team- as confirmed on the ethics form.

**Dealing with difficult situations**

Your personal safety whilst carrying out home visits is more important than the research. If ever you feel unsafe in someone’s home, **leave.**

If you should ever be involved in an incident, you must report it as soon as possible to your supervisor and to the police. An ‘incident’ includes situations such as theft of equipment or physical assault. You must send a written account of what happened to your supervisor, giving date, time of day, location and the details of what occurred. Having reported the incident to the police, they will acknowledge they have it on file and allocate an ‘incident number’. This number should also be given to your line manager/supervisor as soon as possible. The Health and Safety Officer at Birkbeck will be notified as part of his/her ongoing monitoring of general staff safety issues.

If you are verbally harassed or threatened, report this to your supervisor/manager who will consider what course of action should be taken.

You also have a responsibility for the well-being of your participants. Even with careful preparation, it is possible a participant will become upset during the interview. It is your responsibility to look out for signs of this and respond appropriately. If the participant does become upset, you should stop and ask if he/she is OK, would like a break, or to stop the interview. If the participant shows considerable distress, it may be appropriate to inquire as to whether they might consider seeking support e.g. from their GP or a relevant counselling service. If it is appropriate, you can have numbers of relevant agencies to offer. However this is only likely to arise occasionally.

In the extremely unlikely event that you fear the participant is at risk of harming themselves seriously, you should offer to accompany them to a medical centre. You should also report this to your manager/supervisor as soon as possible. If you are concerned the person has or may harm someone else, you should also report this to your supervisor/manager ASAP. The supervisor/manager will decide what further action should be taken. It is in these rare circumstances, when you are concerned that someone is at risk of harming themselves or they report having harmed or intending to harm someone else, then your duty of care overrides confidentiality.

If for any further reason, you feel uncomfortable about some aspect of an interview, arrange to discuss it at your next meeting with your supervisor/manager.

**Safeguarding data**

It is important to have systems in place to protect data that you collect. As soon as is practicably possible, audio files should be transferred from recorders to password protected computers and the file deleted from the recorder. Participants should be allocated a code-number or pseudonym. The information linking a code or pseudonym to a participant must be kept in a separate secure place from the research data collected. Paper copies of documents with participant information e.g. consent forms should be kept in a locked draw.

Data is at its most vulnerable when being transported back from the field to the dept. Try to do this as soon as possible and exercise particular care during this time.

During transcription, all personal identifying information should be removed. Data can be kept for an agreed period of time to allow analysis to be completed. After this, it should be destroyed/removed.

**Sources**

This document has been compiled by drawing on a number of existing protocols and documents. Researchers in the Dept have extensive experience conducting field research and this draws on their good practices and existing guidelines which have proved successful and helpful in many research projects, including several large scale ones, with interviews conducted in locations all around the UK and in all kinds of home circumstances.

In addition, various other documents have been consulted:

Social research association <http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/safety-code/>

Suzy Lamplugh Trust <https://www.suzylamplugh.org/Pages/Category/personal-safety-training>

Birkbeck health and safety webpage <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/so/>

Follow these links for more details.

September 2017