A Code of Practice for the Safety of Social Researchers

Introduction to the Code

This is the SRA's Code of Practice for the safety of social researchers, particularly those conducting research in the field on their own. The code focuses on safety in interviewing or observation in private settings but is of relevance to working in unfamiliar environments in general.

There are a number of dimensions to the risk that social researchers may face when involved in close social interaction:
- risk of physical threat or abuse
- risk of psychological trauma, as a result of actual or threatened violence or the nature of what is disclosed during the interaction
- risk of being in a comprising situation, in which there might be accusations of improper behaviour
- increased exposure to risks of everyday life and social interaction, such as road accidents and infectious illness
- risk of causing psychological or physical harm to others.

The Code is designed for research funders, employers, research managers and researchers carrying out fieldwork. The aims are to point out safety issues which need to be considered in the design and conduct of social research in the field and to encourage procedures to reduce the risk. The intention is not to be alarmist about potential dangers but to minimise anxieties or insecurities which might affect the quality of the research.

The Code covers:
- clarifying responsibilities
- budgeting for safety
- planning for safety in research design
- risk assessment
- preparing for fieldwork
- setting up fieldwork
- interview precautions
- maintaining contact
- conduct of interviews
- strategies for handling risk situations
- safety of respondents
- debriefing and support after the event
- making guidelines stick.

Clarifying responsibilities

Employers of researchers, generally universities or research institutes, have a 'duty of care' towards their employees under the terms of the Health and Safety at Work Act, extended by the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations which are supported by a European Union Framework

Directive. The European Directive provides a code covering elements of guidance such as:

- avoid risk altogether
- combat risks at source
- adapt work to the individual
- make sure employees understand what they need to do
- ensure that an understanding of risk is integrated within the organisation's overall policy framework.

Although a personnel officer might legally stand as the employer, the duty of care might be regarded as reverting to the research manager who might be, for example, either the head of the research unit or the grant-holder.

Safety at work is a dual responsibility of the employer and the employee. A number of situations can arise in the conduct of social research where the responsibility for safety might be contested, if, for example, a researcher has to stay overnight in a hotel while on fieldwork.

Budgeting for safety

All research proposals and funding agreements should include the costs of ensuring the safety of researchers working on the project. It may be helpful to distinguish infrastructure costs which are apportioned to all projects, from costs particular to the project.

Infrastructure costs might cover training on risk assessment, communication aids, personal or vehicle insurance cover, a named member of staff responsible for fieldwork safety, staffing a fieldwork contact point. It will be important to clarify which of these costs fall to the employer and which are to be borne by the funder.

Project costs might include extra fieldwork time (working in pairs, providing a 'shadow' or reporting back to base), taxis or hired cars, appropriate overnight accommodation, special training and counselling for staff researching sensitive topics. These extra costs elements may need to be discussed with funders as the proposal is being drafted.

The research institute should be prepared to devote resources to safety issues: raising awareness; clarifying responsibilities and lines of accountability; creating and implementing procedures; carrying out regular reviews.

Planning for safety in research design

Researcher safety can be built into the design of proposals.

- Choice of methods - include safety in the balance when weighing up methods to answer the research questions. Challenge research

specifications which take for granted face-to-face interviews in potentially risky sites.

- Choice of interview site - consider whether home interviews are necessary for the research. Interviews in a public place may be acceptable and safer substitutes; for example, meeting a working person during the lunch break rather than at home in the evening.
- Staffing - consider designs where it is possible to use pairs of researchers to conduct an interview, or to interview two members of the household simultaneously.
- Choice of researchers - consider whether the research topic requires the recruitment of researchers with particular attributes or experience. Research managers may have to decide against using existing staff if the content of the interview will arouse strong feelings or cause distress.
- Recruitment methods - where possible, design methods of recruitment to allow for prior telephone contact. This provides an opportunity to assess the respondent and their circumstances.
- Time-tabling - take account of the tiring effects of spells of intensive fieldwork. A more relaxed schedule may mean that researchers are more alert to risk and better able to handle incidents.

Assessing risk in the fieldwork site

Once the fieldwork site has been selected try to reconnoitre the area before fieldwork starts. Questions to ask include:

- Is there reliable local public transport?
- Are reputable taxis firms easy to access?
- Is it safe to use private cars and leave them in the area?
- Is there a local rendezvous or contact point for researchers?
- Are there appropriately priced and comfortable hotels within easy reach?
- Are there local tensions to be aware of such as strong cultural, religious or racial divisions?
- What do local sources, such as the police, say about risks in the research territory?
- It may be useful to prepare the ground by:
- meeting local 'community leaders' to explain the research and gain their endorsement.
- informing other significant local actors, such as statutory and community organisations in touch with potential interviewees
- notifying the local police in writing about the purpose and conduct of the research and asking for a contact telephone number.

Risk and respondents

The topics for discussion in many social research interviews - for example, poverty, unemployment, relationship breakdown, social exclusion, bereavement and ill-health - may provoke strong feelings in respondents and

prompt angry reactions. Some research may be concerned explicitly with phenomena where the threat of violence is likely - investigating criminal behaviour, working across sectarian divides or studying homophobic violence, for example.

Some respondents may present a greater possibility of risk than others. Some research involves people who have a history of psychological disturbance or violent behaviour. If such characteristics are known in advance, the researcher and supervisor should be as fully briefed as possible on the risks involved and understand the precautions they need to undertake.

Issues of race, culture and gender may impact significantly on the safety of researchers. Lone female researchers are generally more vulnerable than lone males. More orthodox cultures may be hostile towards them. Certain racialised contexts may make the conduct of non-ethnically-matched interviewing more fraught than otherwise. Risk situations of these kinds may be avoided by contacting respondents in advance to ask about preferences and expectations.

Setting up fieldwork

Wherever possible, interviewers should try to obtain prior information about the characteristics of selected respondents, their housing and living environments.

- Study a map of the area for clues as to its character. Look for schools, post offices, railway stations and other hubs of activity. Think about escape routes from dense housing areas.
- If doubts about safety are indicated, reconnoitre the vicinity in advance to assess the need for accompanied interviews, shadowing and pre-arranged pick-ups.
- If the design allows, telephone in advance to assess the respondent and enquire whether any other members of the household will be at home.
- If 'cold-calling' in a potentially risky area, travel in pairs to set up interviews.
- Arrange alternative venues, already assessed for safety, if security is in doubt.

Interview precautions

Research managers should instruct interviewers to take precautions to minimise risk in the interview situation and ensure that help is at hand. The following practical tips might be considered.

- Avoid going by foot if feeling vulnerable. Use convenient public transport, private car or a reputable taxi firm. Plan the route in advance and always take a map.

- Try to avoid appearing out of place. Dress inconspicuously and unprovocatively, taking account of cultural norms. Equipment and valuable items should be kept out of sight.
- Where 'cold calling', assess the situation before beginning the interview and if in doubt re-arrange the interview for when a colleague can be present. Plan what to say on entry phones to maintain control while protecting confidentiality.
- Try to make sure you are seen entering an interviewee's home. Greet porters or caretakers, ask in a local shop for directions or use other ways of ensuring your presence is noted. But take care not to compromise interviewee confidentiality.
- In multi-storey buildings, think about safety when choosing lifts or staircases.
- If in the light of prior information there is any doubt about personal safety, a co-researcher or paid escort should wait in the dwelling or in a visible position outside. If waiting outside, a system for communicating needs to be arranged in advance.
- Carry a screech alarm or other device to attract attention in an emergency.
- Let the interviewee know that you have a schedule and that others know where you are. Stratagems include arranging for a colleague or taxi to collect you; making phone calls; arranging for calls to be made to you. Leave your mobile phone switched on.
- Assess the layout and the quickest way out. If interviewing in a private dwelling, stay in the communal rooms.
- Always carry identification, a badge or a card, authenticated by the head of the research organisation and giving the researcher's work address and telephone number. Respondents should be invited to check the authenticity.

Maintaining contact

It is essential to establish reliable lines of communication between the usual office base and the fieldwork site. The research manager should designate a responsible person at the office-base fully briefed on the research team's schedule and clearly instructed on when and how to take action.

The main elements of a fieldwork contact system are as follows:

- Details of the researcher's itinerary and appointment times - including names, addresses and telephone numbers of people being interviewed or called and overnight accommodation details - should be left with a designated person at the office base or a temporary fieldwork base (taking care about interviewee confidentiality)
- The researcher should notify base of any changes during fieldwork.
- Fieldworkers should carry mobile phones so that base can contact them.
- Where more than researcher is working in the site they should meet or communicate by mobile phone at pre-arranged times. If such an

arrangement is not kept, the other researcher should inform the responsible person at base.

Ideally, at the end of the day's work a telephone call should be placed informing base that the schedule of work has been completed. This may require the designated person being on duty outside normal office hours to receive the call or check for recorded messages, and to follow-up if no call arrives. Or the employer might contract with an alarm service.

If the researcher prefers to call in to a household member or friend, then this should be agreed with the employer, whose responsibility it is to ensure researcher safety.

Conduct of interview

Despite taking precautions, risk situations may arise in the course of the interview. Issues in race, culture and gender may prompt hostility.

To avoid engaging in inappropriate or provocative behaviour researchers:

- should be briefed on cultural norms
- need to be aware of the gender dynamics of interactions.
- need to appreciate the use of body language and the acceptability or not of physical contact
- need to establish the right social distance - neither over-familiar nor too detached.

Strategies for handling risk situations

Employers should ensure that researchers are trained in techniques for handling threats, abuse or compromising situations, and research managers could consider ways of refreshing their knowledge. External trainers may be useful, both for initial training and in keeping the issue live.

Carrying mobile phones and/or personal alarms may be helpful, as long as these are considered only as part of a comprehensive safety policy. Over-reliance on mobile phones and alarms must not substitute for proper training in inter-personal skills.

Researchers should always carry enough money for both expected and unexpected expenses, including the use of taxis. It is sensible not to appear to be carrying a lot of money, however, and to carry a phone-card, in case it is necessary to use a public telephone.

Household dogs may make some researchers uncomfortable. It is reasonable to ask the owner to put the dog in another room until the researcher has left.

Researchers should also be prepared to deal with the effects of the interview on respondents, and be ready to spot signs that the respondent is becoming

upset or angry. Often, the researcher's training means that strong feelings of this kind can be acknowledged and contained, but there may be occasions when it is more sensible to end the discussion and leave. Such a withdrawal should be decisive and quick, offering an appropriate reason. A lost interview may be made up, if this seems appropriate after discussion with the research manager.

Debriefing and support after the event

When research fieldwork is complete, it is helpful for researchers and their supervisors to reflect on their adherence to the guidelines and raise any difficulties encountered in meeting them. Some research institutes routinely conduct project reviews, and these should include an assessment of fieldwork safety. Researchers should be encouraged to cover fieldwork safety dimensions in reporting their research findings to funders.

If incidents have occurred, these should be recorded. Serious incidents should be discussed with safety officers or professional associations. If violent incidents have occurred which may have some impact on the well-being of the researcher, these should be reported to the employer's health and safety officer and to the local police force.

If incidents arise during the course of the fieldwork, these need to be dealt with straight away for the well-being of the researcher. The trauma of violence or the threat of violence may require structured support through counselling or the use of victim support organisations, or by providing leave of absence (taken as sickness leave). If the fieldwork is not complete, there may be a need for particular forms of support to enable the researcher to undertake any remaining work.

Appropriate debriefing - which should also protect the confidentiality of the respondent - may also help the researcher come to terms in a healthy way with the incident and feel free to continue his/her work programme, as well as providing further material to inform the development of safety codes.

Making guidelines stick

Ways of making guidelines stick will include awareness raising among both new and experienced staff.

- Safety issues should feature in the training of all new research staff, and guidelines should be included in induction packs and staff handbooks.
- There is a need for continual reminders and reinforcement throughout a researcher's career.
- Supervisors and research managers may need to take staff through procedures with each new fieldwork period.
- Support staff responsible for setting up fieldwork arrangements should be trained in the procedures.

There may be role for safety officers and outside bodies, such as the Suzy Lamplugh Trust advisers, to visit occasionally to bring fresh perspectives and maintain interest in issues.

It will always be important to remind research staff that if they ignore their employers' policies and procedures for health and safety at work, they may be considered negligent should an incident occur.

Some further reading on the subject

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