

Best Practice in Research for the Methodist Church¹

Codes of conduct for research exist to make sure work done is of the highest possible standard and is of the greatest possible use. Such codes, which promote ethical standards and standards of competency, as well as conformity to legal regulations, safeguard the quality of research and protect those conducting and participating in it, as well as those using and learning from the results. Codes of conduct therefore promote trust between these stakeholders and ensure that research is fitting to its purpose.

The Connexional Team seeks at all times to remain a highly professional organisation within its distinctively Christian way of being and working. The stated core values in the *Ways of Working* document for the Connexional Team include a commitment to honesty and openness and to personal and professional integrity. This document seeks to ensure that these values can be embedded fully into all research work which takes place in the Team and thus to ensure that our research work reflects the culture to which we are all committed, designed itself to ensure the highest professional standards.

It is the intention of this code of conduct to provide a descriptive and informative set of guidelines to ensure that staff members can live out these core values within the specific remit of best practice in research. It will be a principle of the Connexional Team's policy for research that any research work used by the Team for its purposes should be done in conformity with this code of conduct. In addition, any research put forward to the wider Church or produced externally to the Team which has not conformed to the principles set out will not be promoted or sanctioned by the Team as providing credible results unless conformity to the principles, or to those of a professional research body, can be proven in retrospect.

Ways of Working commits the Connexional Team to being a beacon of excellence for the whole Church. This document is therefore also written for the benefit and use of all members of the Methodist Church who conduct research, who may wish to be guided by the principles espoused in order to ensure that research conducted on behalf of the Church or in association with it conforms to professional standards of best practice.

This said, the following code is not intended to be rigidly proscriptive or exhaustive. The code is set out mainly as a set of broad principles that can be applicable to most methodologies and potential subject matters. They are therefore wide in scope and will inevitably be limited in some areas and in some points of detail. For further guidance on more detailed ethical codes of conduct for research (for example, on data protection regulations), email research@methodistchurch.org.uk.

¹ The above guidelines were developed with reference to guidelines and resources from: The Research Councils of the United Kingdom; The Royal Statistical Society; Oxford University; Cambridge University; The Social Research Association; The American Associations of University Professors; The Natural Environment Research Council; The National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences.

Code of Conduct

Members of the Connexional Team conducting any form of research should take steps to promote the core values of the Team and the Methodist Church, ensuring the highest standards of research and in the conduct of research in order to be a beacon of excellence for the Methodist Church.

This should include carrying out regular reviews of research policies and procedures in each cluster and sub-cluster (including such work as surveys and consultations) and also the careful management and supervision of research projects. Regular reporting on and discussions about the standards of good conduct and ethics in research work that is taking place should happen at the instigation of the lead staff member conducting that research. These should take place with line managers and also the Research Officers and others in the Team identified by them as specialists in particular research areas and methodologies.

All members of the Team are encouraged to consult research specialists, and particularly the Research Officers when performing research, particularly the planning and designing phases. This includes in designing simple research projects such as surveys or holding small focus groups.

When conducting using and promoting research within the Connexion, members of the Team should adhere to the following working principles:

“Trust, Honesty and Openness...”

Honesty

Honestly report data, results, methods and procedures used in research when results of that research are communicated or used (either inside the Team or externally).

Be honest about yourself, your skills, and your work. Only offer to do work or provide services which are within your professional competence. Failing to do this may lead to the collection of data which cannot be used.

Be honest about the limitations of the work you have done and the uses to which it can be put.

Always provide your most honest professional opinion with regard to a research project or methodology. If, when being asked to complete work, your professional judgement is overruled, indicate clearly the likely consequences. In every case, do not allow a misleading summary of data to be issued in your name.

Openness

Be open to criticism and new ideas. Welcome the input of other research professionals and individuals with skills which may assist you in your work.

“Personal and Professional Integrity...”

Objectivity and Integrity

Research benefits from the observance of fairness and equity in the conduct of researchers.

Research methodologies should be chosen that take account of and value human diversity and diversity of opinion. It is important to acknowledge the way in which research is influenced by decisions made concerning research subjects, especially in respect of age, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, lifestyle or any other significant social or cultural factor. These should not be influencing factors in research methodology or analysis except where appropriate and relevant to the study (and explicitly stated in any communication of results).

Integrity and a reflective approach to research become essential to our noticing, understanding and reporting. Strive to acknowledge and take account of bias (unavoidable or deliberate) in methodology, data collection, analysis and interpretation, both by commission and omission. Avoid self-deception in this area and always disclose to your line manager and/or another appropriate person or body any conflict of interest (actual or potential) and discuss this at the earliest possible stage. Make a point of acknowledging your own subjectivity as a researcher when reporting and publishing work for a wider audience.

Care should be taken to acknowledge the difference between views and opinions derived from data and what is assumed or ‘general’ knowledge.

Carefulness

Seek actively to avoid errors and negligence in research by carefully and critically examining your own work and the work of your peers. Keep good records of research activities, such as data collection, research design, and correspondence with agencies or journals.

Seek to improve and keep current your professional knowledge and skills in research. Be aware of relevant technological developments, procedures and standards.

Respect

Give credit where credit is due. Give proper acknowledgement for all contributions to research. Do not present the work of others as your own.

Do not use unpublished data, methods, or results without permission.

Balancing Obligations

Researchers’ relationships with and commitments to the Team and/or other commissioning bodies should be made explicit during the course of research work and in the publication of any findings and analysis. These relationships should not compromise a commitment to professional or ethical integrity, nor to the law, nor to the maintenance of rigorous standards of quality and objectivity.

A conflict of obligations may occur when the commissioning person or body of an inquiry wishes to ensure in advance that certain results will be achieved. By agreeing to conduct such work, the researcher would compromise their professional responsibility to ensure that the

quality and objectivity of their work is maintained, and should not agree to this course of action.

Obligation to broader research work and research professionals dictates that, without compromising obligations to commissioning bodies, subjects or society at large, procedures and findings should be made to be open to collegial and connexion-wide review.

Legality

In every case where relevant, familiarise yourself with laws relating to the collection and handling of data required in your work and to ensure that your practices are in line with these. Also ensure that your data collection and communication practices are in line with wider Team, Church, other institutional and governmental policies and guidelines, or those associated with appointed bodies involved in the relevant area of research (see below on data protection).

Honour patents, copyrights, and other forms of intellectual property.

Establish from the outset the owner of the research data and results and agree with them the parameters for the wider distribution of that material.

Avoidance of Misconduct

By adhering to the above principles, researchers should at all times avoid, either knowingly or through lack of awareness, misconduct in their data collection and analysis. Misconduct includes all action that does or could lead to outcomes which are unsupportable or which are damaging to those who participated in or might use the research work. Action which deliberately, through recklessness, or through carelessness falls short of the principles for best practice is unacceptable within the Connexional Team, or for use by the Team and will not be used to support policy making or other areas of work conducted by the Team.

Misconduct in research includes (but is not limited to):

- Fabrication
- Falsification
- Misrepresentation
- Plagiarism
- Mismanagement and preservation of data and primary materials
- Breach of duty of care to research subjects

“Love, Value, Care and Esteem for Others...”

Courtesy

Make clear to those assisting or participating in a research project, before undertaking it, the level of feedback (including the dissemination of results) that can and will be given and ensure that this is timely, comprehensive and as agreed.

Where feedback cannot be given, make this clear and set out the reasons for this before others assist in research.

Protecting People

When conducting research with people, minimise any potential harm and risk and maximize benefits; respect human dignity, privacy, and autonomy; take special precautions with vulnerable populations; and strive to distribute the benefits and burdens of research fairly. Inquiries involving human subjects should be based wherever possible on the freely given informed consent of subjects. In voluntary inquiries, subjects should not be under the impression that they are required to participate. They should be aware of their entitlement to refuse at any stage for whatever reason and to withdraw data just supplied. Information that would be likely to affect a subject's willingness to participate should not be deliberately withheld.

Have regard to basic human rights and avoid any actions that adversely affect such rights. Enquiries involving human subjects should, wherever possible, be based on the freely given informed consent of subjects. The identities of subjects should be kept confidential unless consent for disclosure is explicitly obtained.

Confidentiality

Protect confidential communications. Do not disclose or authorise to be disclosed, or use for any reason than that which has been agreed in advance, confidential information acquired in the course of research, except with prior written permission of all parties involved.

Data Protection

Data protection legislation guards individuals against possible misuse of information about them held by others. All research done by the Connexional Team or which the Team uses must conform to current data protection legislation. It is the duty of those conducting the research to study this legislation and ensure conformity to it.

The principles of data protection legislation require that personal data shall:

- be processed fairly and lawfully;
- be held only for specified purposes and not used or disclosed in any way incompatible with those purposes;
- be adequate, relevant and not excessive;
- be accurate and kept up-to-date;
- not be kept for longer than necessary for the particular purpose;
- be processed in accordance with data subject's rights;
- be kept secure;
- not be transferred outside the European Economic Area unless the recipient country ensures an adequate level of protection

Data protection legislation provides individuals with rights in connection with personal data held about them. This should be considered in all collection and handling of personal data during research work.

In the case of sensitive personal data, additional restrictions apply and explicit consent should normally be requested of any subject before this data is collected.

The Current data protection policy for the Methodist Church can be found at http://intranet.methodist.org.uk/downloads/data_protection.doc