

Ethical evaluation principles

Across this, and our other resources in this section, we make a distinction between ethics and risk. For the purposes of these resources at least:

- *ethics* we frame as relating to the personal and mental wellbeing and proper treatment of people we involve in the evaluation procedure.
- *risk* deals with the wider project being evaluated, and any potential damage it may cause.

Beyond this distinction, a number of key principles should be adhered to in carrying out evaluations.

Report what happened on a project...

...as opposed to what you, the researcher, or your clients would like to think happened. It can be frustrating when you know what the project intended to achieve, but don't see this coming through. You may be asking the wrong interview questions, for example, that aren't effectively eliciting the responses you need. This demonstrates the importance of getting those questions right in the first place, as we've [discussed](#). If you realise too late that you're lacking that insight, you may be able to return to people with additional questions, or tweak your questions mid way through a run of interviews.

Of course, if the participants are squarely telling you that the project was ineffective, this needs to be heard. From the outset, you will need to make the terms of your role as evaluators clear. You are not there to simply 'validate' or 'prove' that a project was successful - such terminology assumes from the start that it was, and that you are gathering data to support this position. The role should be framed as more exploratory, identifying voices, narratives and data that will tell the whole story. It becomes easier to take this position if you are evaluating as a third party.

Evidencing

Any statements you make in an evaluation report need evidencing from the data and materials you've gathered in your research. How you phrase it is more flexible, where you might talk about 'most people we spoke to' having a certain opinion. Generally speaking, if you are dealing with a small number of interview participants, it's more helpfully transparent to say 'four of the six interviewees', as opposed to 66%. You might instead use percentages for larger numbers of survey responses, for example.

In presenting this evidence to support the evaluation, try to avoid your own opinions and bias creeping in too strongly. There is usually an expectation that certain recommendations will be made as a result of the data gathered, but be clear in the reporting where it is you as the researcher making such recommendations or 'interpreting' the data. Be clear what you can and can't say, as a result of the work undertaken.

Informed consent

Two more key principles relate directly to your research participants. Firstly, 'informed consent' is the permission that participants give you to use their interview responses or anything else they might be putting into the process. This implies that the participant is duly informed of everything they need to know about the research before they take part. The 'need to know' basis is important though, because they should feel informed enough to make the decision, but without knowing too much so that they feel they should 'do their homework' before arriving, or are overly prepared so that it's harder for you to elicit 'gut' reactions. A first approach by email, for example, might simply state "we're doing some anonymous interviews about the project you took part in, and were wondering if we could talk to you as part of this". If they agree, more information would then be offered on the day of the interview, before you properly get started - either as part of an [opening script](#) and/or within the consent form.

The 'consent' part should be clearly recorded, for your own and the participant's purposes. Ideally, this should be done using a consent form as we have described in these resources. Keep one copy for your records, signed and date by your participant, and give them a copy of their own. Consent can also be recorded in dialogue, which is why we have advised starting any audio recording of an interview before the start of the researcher's opening script. A script that ends with "is that ok, do you have any questions?" and then records verbal agreement, may suffice as consent - especially in situations such as [vox-pop style interviews](#) at an event.

In order to fairly make a decision about whether to participate, the participants may need to know:

- What happens to their responses - researchers usually tell people that recording an interview is to make note-taking easier, and that they'll be transcribed. The audio clips of the interview will not usually be made public or used in a report.

- The final output - does the evaluation result in a written report with an audience limited to the stakeholders? Or is it used as a wider evidence base, and might be made more public?
- Anonymity - we usually offer anonymity so that the interviewee can not be identified. However sometimes this is impossible or even undesirable if the interviewee would like to speak out and be recognised personally for their contribution.

Withdrawal without prejudice

The second key point is that participants may withdraw at any point during the interview. This may be to use the toilet, get some fresh air, take a break, or any other reason they may choose not to give - they are giving up their time after all, and assisting your evaluation. Alternatively, if they are uncomfortable with the way it is going, or would simply rather not continue, they can pull out altogether. This means that you will still be able to use everything they've said up to that point, but no more. It should be clear that this is totally acceptable, and this won't affect any representation or perception of them if they do pull out i.e. 'without prejudice'.

They may also ask to see the transcription after the interview is done, or request an option to redact anything they say. In theory, this shouldn't be necessary. The point of agreeing consent before interview is that they then choose what to say, but also what to leave out that may be sensitive. However, these terms of agreement can often be forgotten in the heat of fluid conversation, so people may regret their wording or request that something be removed either during or after the interview, and this should generally be respected, especially given [GDPR-regulation](#).

In other situations your consent agreement document might suggest that they can comment on the transcription and you'll take that into account, but it doesn't guarantee removing anything they request. The key point with all of this is clarity, so that the interviewee knows the exact terms before they engage with you regarding anonymity, quoting, and post-interview redactions. Finally though, as much as you should make them comfortable, you have a job of research to do. If all of your interviewees suddenly decided to withdraw their interview data, you would be unable to complete your evaluation, so ensure you can negotiate and strike a balance, or find a way to anonymise without losing valuable data.