

The Only Way is Ethics: A simple checklist for highly complex problems

The subject of ethics and how it should be approached can become a whole (or partial) way of life for some people, religious followers being obvious examples. The topic can arguably be even broader than religion, as concepts such as Max Weber's protestant ethic can be applied to people of any belief system. (This ethic, noted at the start of the twentieth century, concerned people's values for discipline and restraint, whereas contemporary scholars may note its displacement by the consumerist ethic (see Harari, 2014: 390-91).)

These examples illustrate the sense of a higher purpose in ethics, and probably the most famous example of undergraduates subscribing to these kinds of agreed shared values is medical students and their Hippocratic Oath. Criminology students may lack such a prominent source, but it is equally important that they engage with ethics.

'The Only Way is Ethics' ('TOWIE') is hopefully a memorable prompt for the need to make ethics central to your higher education studies (and it is also an example of the high-level creativity of students – in this case, the Student Union at the LSE). Though criminologists have no oath, we do have a [Statement of Ethics for Researchers](#) from the British Society of Criminology, the professional body concerned with 'research integrity' and 'research misconduct' from criminologists. Engagement with this resource, including its Q&A and recommended reading, can produce detailed ethical reflections that far exceed a cursory tick-in-the-box in a dissertation proforma or other research document.

Appreciation of the very broad nature of ethics is essential if this requirement is going to be effectively met. TOWIE may seem just a simple breakdown of ethics into four areas, but an open mind, informed by study, will help you recognise the possible relevance of each for your research.

- Have you secured informed consent?** Has every research subject been fully informed about the nature of the research, its methods and potential risks? Is every subject participating free from coercion? Have you reconsidered these questions at different phases of your research?
- Have you avoided any misrepresentation?** Has there been any deception with any of the research subjects? Have you considered whether it has occurred through either the omission or commission of representations about your research? What was your process for ensuring this obligation was met?
- Have you ensured that your data is/will be accurate?** As with all ethical principles, you need to think broadly to meet this demand. It applies not only to any misuses of your data, whether intentional, careless or innocent, but also to other people's data in your research. Getting such contentious data verified is vital for meeting this principle.
- Have you ensured that no harm will come to research subjects, and their privacy will be protected?** Harm is another broad ethical concept and needs to be recognised through your choice of research methods. It requires thought, even if from your perspective any amount of harm seems negligible. This principle means the identity of research subjects must be protected and that you give and enforce assurances about data access.

A regular audit of these ethical issues at different stages in your work will demonstrate your effective involvement with a TOWIE approach to undergraduate research.

Reference: Harari, Y., N. (2014) *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*. London: Harvill Secker.