

LGBT

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**Ethical research: good
practice guide to
researching LGBT
communities and issues**

LGBT Foundation



Purpose of this Guide

This document aims to aid researchers in identifying, understanding and resolving ethical issues at all stages of the research process, with added focus on how these issues might apply to work with lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) communities. It draws on the ethical principles set out by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Framework for Research Ethics (2015). The guide consists of five sections each covering a key principle of ethical research practice. Each section covers relevant questions that researchers should be asking themselves when carrying out their work. Where appropriate, additional information on how each question might apply to LGBT research has been included.

Using the Guide

The guide is designed to comprehensively cover a range of ethical questions that might arise while conducting research, so a contents page has been included overleaf to enable you to quickly locate specific issues. If you don't have a lot of experience with research ethics, it is recommended that you read the guide in its entirety.

Contents

Principle 1: Integrity and Quality

1.1: Are my research questions worth asking and what do they add to existing knowledge?	4
1.2: Do I have a good knowledge of the community I intend to work with?	4
1.3: Are the methods I intend to use appropriate for the research I am conducting?	5
1.4: Am I confident that I have the necessary skills for this piece of research?	5
1.5: If the research is funded, what are the expectations of the funder?	5

Principle 2: Fully Informing Researchers and Participants

2.1: How informed and aware are the research staff?	7
2.2: How can I fully inform participants about my research topic?	7
2.3: How might other factors affect my ability to fully inform participants?	8
2.4: If the research is funded, what implications might this have for informing participants?	9

Principle 3: Confidentiality and Anonymity

3.1: Are the researchers properly briefed on confidentiality and anonymity?	10
3.2: What steps can I take to ensure confidentiality and anonymity?	10
3.3: How might my research topic affect confidentiality and anonymity?	10
3.4: How might my research methods affect confidentiality and anonymity?	11
3.5: What other factors might affect my ability to preserve confidentiality and anonymity?	11
3.6: How do I intend to store the data?	12
3.7: How can I ensure confidentiality and anonymity in funded research?	12

Principle 4: Voluntary Participation, Free from Coercion

4.1: How can I ensure that participants are able to give informed consent?	14
--	----

4.2: Do I know how to obtain informed consent from children and other vulnerable people?	14
4.3: How do I avoid coercion?	14
4.4: Should I allow participants to withdraw their consent?	15
4.5: How do I obtain proof of consent?	15
4.6: Am I aware of when it might be inappropriate to seek proof of consent?	16

Principle 5: Avoiding Harm

5.1: What sensitivities are involved in my research?	17
5.2: What can I do to help preserve the wellbeing of those participating in sensitive research?	17
5.3: What can I do to help preserve the wellbeing of those conducting the research?	18
5.4: How can I avoid harm with respect to the methods I am using?	18
5.5: How can I avoid harm with respect to funded research?	18

<u>Further Information</u>	19
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Principle 1: Integrity and Quality

Ensuring that your work is of a good standard should be a priority for any researcher, but it should be regarded as an ethical concern as well. People give their time and energy to participate in research, so to produce something which lacks integrity, quality or impact would be a waste of this input. Researchers are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

1.1: Are my research questions worth asking and what do they add to existing knowledge?

What does your research hope to achieve and what impact will it have? Look into previous research surrounding the topic you hope to investigate and identify what is and is not known already. Make a commitment to avoid using the time and input given to you by participants on questions that have already been answered. Design your research questions with the aim of contributing new knowledge to the field.

Application to LGBT Research: This initial consideration is an important one for work with LGBT communities, who are not always strongly represented in existing research. In many ways, this is a good opportunity for researchers, who may have identified research areas where LGBT people are barely represented at all. In such cases, try to ensure that your LGBT participants are at the centre of the research you are conducting. Think about the impact of your research and how any new knowledge your research provides could benefit the community. In relating your findings, ensure that you are amplifying the voices of your LGBT participants, rather than trying to speak for them.

1.2: Do I have a good knowledge of the community I intend to work with?

If you intend to conduct research with a particular community, it is important that you have a good understanding of said community from the outset. This will help to ensure that your research is designed with respect for your participants in mind, that your interactions with participants are sensitive and appropriate and that the findings you generate can more accurately represent the community you are working with. If you are uncertain, it is recommended that you seek out relevant resources and information about the community you are researching before beginning your work.

Application to LGBT Research: If, for example, you wish to conduct research with members of the trans community, ask yourself how well you understand trans identities and issues. Try and familiarise yourself with the full spectrum of gender identity, the social and political issues affecting the lives of trans people (discrimination, healthcare, abuse etc.) and the kind of language you should be using to ensure your research is inclusive.

Following the same example, if you are not trans yourself you should also acknowledge that despite how well-informed you are, you will not understand more about being a trans person than your trans participants do. The ability to conduct research with particular communities is absolutely not limited to members of those communities, but it is important to understand that if you are not a member of the community you are researching, this deprives you of personal knowledge and experience that your participants will have.

1.3: Are the methods I intend to use appropriate for the research I am conducting?

Ensuring that your research design is valid is essential, so it is important to reflect on whether the methods you are using suit your research questions and improve the overall quality of the research. Can your methods of collecting and analysing data provide valid answers? Do you have enough time to conduct your research using the methods you have chosen? What sample size do you want to aim for and how will this affect the representativeness of your research? A wide variety of literature exists to help address all of these questions, so it is recommended you draw upon these resources when developing your research design.

1.4: Am I confident that I have the necessary skills for this piece of research?

Identify your strengths and weaknesses as a researcher, then determine how they will affect the research you intend to conduct. Do you feel confident that you are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills? These may include planning, timekeeping, understanding of the research methods you will be using, knowledge of relevant software, etc. If not, aim to develop these skills before you begin your research or consider adapting the design of your research to better suit your abilities.

1.5: If the research is funded, what are the expectations of the funder?

Check whether the person or organisation funding your research has any expectations that might affect its quality, such as the use of a particular research method. With the previous guidelines in mind, evaluate how well these specifications meet the aims of the research and be willing to discuss your ideas. In the interests of integrity, it is also important to know how your funder intends to use the research once complete, especially when the research involves vulnerable or marginalised people. Can you be certain that the research will be used to benefit these communities and will not be used in an exploitative manner? How do you feel about the intended outcomes of the research?

Application to LGBT Research: Knowing how your funder intends to use your research will help you to ensure that the finished product will actually be used to benefit LGBT communities. Perhaps your funder wants to use your research in order to find out how to better target advertising at the LGBT community. Do you feel like this is a use that benefits the LGBT community, or does it simply benefit your funder? Is this something you are comfortable with?

Principle 2: Fully Informing Researchers and Participants

Ensuring that everybody involved in the research is fully informed of its purpose, methods and intended uses is a very important ethical concern. They must also be aware of what their participation in the research entails and any risks that might be involved. Researchers are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

2.1: How informed and aware are the research staff?

It is the responsibility of the researcher(s) to ensure that participants understand what they are being asked to do, why they are being asked to do it and what risks might be involved. It is therefore essential that any researcher working on the project is sufficiently knowledgeable and able to provide this information. How much do you and your team know about the topic you are researching? What resources could you draw upon to fill in any gaps in your knowledge? Do all the researchers involved feel confident in explaining the research to participants? You should also identify any risks to participants beforehand and think of ways to address them. For example, if your research concerns a topic that might be emotionally upsetting for participants, you might identify some support services that you could signpost participants toward if they feel affected.

You should also make sure that all researchers are aware of the impact the research might have on them. How might the research affect those conducting it? Are there any emotional concerns that might arise for you or your team during the research process, e.g. because the topic is sensitive to a particular researcher or you are gathering data on a difficult issue? Has it been ensured that everyone involved in conducting the research will be properly acknowledged and thanked for their contribution? Might the research conflict with the personal views of any of the researchers and will this affect their ability to be involved?

Application to LGBT Research: You should make sure that none of the researchers are ignorant or prejudiced towards LGBT people as best you can, as this is only likely to make participants uncomfortable and compromise the quality and aims of the research. Beyond this, you need to ensure that the researchers are sufficiently knowledgeable about LGBT issues and the topic you are researching to be able to adequately inform participants. If any of the researchers are themselves LGBT, think about how the topic you have chosen to research might affect them personally. In the case of sensitive research topics, a variety of support services and charities specifically for LGBT people (including LGBT Foundation) exist as useful places to signpost participants toward.

2.2: How can I fully inform participants about my research topic?

Your participants must be as informed as possible at every stage of their involvement in the research. A clearly written information sheet for participants

(which can be printed or online, depending on the methods used) is an ideal way to communicate any necessary details. Try to include the following information:

- The focus of the research
- The purpose of the research
- Who is conducting the research
- Who is funding the research, if applicable
- How the research will be used once complete
- How and why participants have been recruited
- What the research is asking participants to do
- How much time participants are being asked to give
- Risks of taking part and how these risks are being addressed

Though in some cases the withholding of certain information from participants is necessary for a piece of research, this is typically only considered acceptable in very specific and exceptional circumstances. Generally speaking, any variations to the principle of fully informed consent will not be considered ethically justifiable and should be avoided.

2.3: How might other factors affect my ability to fully inform participants?

You should consider what else might affect your ability to fully inform your participants. If you plan to access participants through a service or organisation, do you have permission to do so and contacts that can help you distribute information? If you are informing participants in person, are you in a quiet space where your participants can listen to you clearly and without interruption? Are there any language or access needs issues that you need to address? Are your participants in a fit state to understand you and give consent? Are you giving your participants time to ask you any questions they might have?

If you are conducting your research online, be aware that you are not physically present for participants to ask you any questions they might have. Try to be as comprehensive as you can with the information you give and make sure you provide some contact information so that participants can reach you if they are unsure about any aspect of the research.

Application to LGBT Research: When going about informing participants, be sensitive if you are trying to access LGBT participants in an environment in which they may not be 'out', e.g. in school or at work. Also bear this in mind when deciding on a setting to interact with participants in person, as privacy may be particularly important. Try to appear comfortable and knowledgeable about LGBT issues, so that participants feel reassured that they can ask you any questions they might have. Remember that some LGBT spaces, such as gay bars, are probably not appropriate places to try and inform your participants about your research due to noise, alcohol, lack of privacy etc.

2.4: If the research is funded, what implications might this have for participants?

Your participants should be made aware of who is funding your research and why. Though it might not seem like an obvious concern, there are situations where a funding source might affect participant willingness to be involved in your research. In such cases, failing to inform your participants about your funding would amount to deceiving them and would not be considered ethical.

Application to LGBT Research: If, for example, one of your participants is an LGBT rights activist, they may object to participating in research funded by organisations that they believe to be homophobic, biphobic or transphobic. They might also object to participating if they believed the research might be used by the funding organisation to harm the LGBT community in some way.

Principle 3: Confidentiality and Anonymity

It is the ethical responsibility of the researcher(s) to preserve the confidentiality and anonymity of participants throughout the research process. In accordance with the principle of providing full information, anything you do in order to preserve confidentiality and anonymity should be clearly communicated to participants. This ensures that they can speak freely and that they won't face consequences for their involvement in the research should they be identified. For vulnerable or marginalised participants, it is important to remember that this principle is especially important as it is possible that their identification could pose a genuine threat to their wellbeing. Researchers are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

3.1: Are the researchers properly briefed on confidentiality and anonymity?

Participants must be able to trust that researchers will not share any of the information given to them to anybody outside of the research team, so it is essential that everybody involved is properly briefed on confidentiality and anonymity. Ensure that all members of the research team understand who they can and cannot discuss the data with. It is best to select participants that are not known to anybody involved in conducting the research, as this risks the participant being identified and also risks the researcher learning information about the participant that they would not have otherwise been told. This also helps to avoid situations where participants might not feel able to answer honestly because of their relationship to the researcher, which can also affect the principle of integrity and validity.

3.2: What steps can I take to ensure confidentiality and anonymity?

Consider all the ways you can preserve participant confidentiality and anonymity, then decide which are best suited to your research. Your participants must not be identified with their real names, so what will you use instead? Some options include using pseudonyms (false names) and number-coding (Participant 1, Participant 2 etc.). You must also ensure that any other information that could help identify participants is not published in your research. This is largely context-dependent and relative to your sample size; information like gender, age or ethnicity might well enable identification of a participant from a small sample (within an office), but is unlikely to be able to from a large one (across a city). Some details such as specific postcode, appearance or other distinctive information about a participant should be avoided altogether, as these can enable identification even within a very large sample.

3.3: How might my research topic affect confidentiality and anonymity?

All research must ensure confidentiality and anonymity, but sometimes this requirement is particularly important due to the nature of the research itself. For example, if you were researching intimate partner violence by interviewing survivors,

it could present obvious danger to your participants if they were to be identified. In such cases, particular attention should be paid at every stage to ensure that participants cannot be identified through the research. You may choose to adapt the resources you give to participants (such as the information sheet) so that the subject of your research is not over-emphasised, in case the document is later found by anyone other than the participant. Returning to the example of an interview-based study on intimate partner violence, you might generalise by stating on your information sheet that the research concerns experiences of relationships. You can then discuss the specific nature of the topic verbally and in person with participants, without risk.

Application to LGBT Research: All research topics involving LGBT participants should, to some degree, require extra care on the part of the researcher(s) to preserve confidentiality and anonymity. Regardless of the specific nature of the research topic, not all LGBT people will be comfortable with their identities being known, so it is the responsibility of those conducting the research to make certain that this information is not shared outside of the research team.

3.4: How might my research methods affect confidentiality and anonymity?

Sometimes the methods you use to collect data require extra consideration with regard to confidentiality and anonymity. This is particularly true of methods which involve groups of participants, such as focus groups. In such cases, it is not only important to understand that researchers are committed to preserving confidentiality and anonymity, but participants are as well. Ensure that everybody understands not to discuss the information shared outside of the group. Create some “ground rules” and make sure that everybody follows them. If you intend to use a group-based method for a sensitive research topic, evaluate whether the data you hope to generate is worth the potential harm that could be caused if confidentiality and anonymity is breached. Similarly, if your research methods require you to provide additional staff (translators, sign language interpreters etc.) you should ensure that they are also properly briefed.

Application to LGBT Research: In the case of using group-based methods for LGBT-related research projects, it is very important that you stress to participants not to disclose the identities of anyone in attendance, as this could ‘out’ participants without their permission.

3.5: What other factors might affect my ability to preserve confidentiality and anonymity?

You should give some thought to the setting in which you are collecting your data. If interviewing or leading a focus group, ensure that you will not be overheard by anybody outside of the room. It is harder to control the privacy of particularly public settings, like cafes or bars, so make sure your venue is appropriate. If you are conducting your research at an institution or organisation, the conditions of using the

setting might present a challenge to confidentiality and anonymity. For example, a school might ask you to disclose any examples of bad behaviour that you are told about, or office managers might be keen to know if anybody criticised the workplace. In the interests of confidentiality and anonymity, you should be prepared to seek a different setting if such conditions are put forward.

Very occasionally, it may be necessary to breach confidentiality and anonymity because of your duty of care as a researcher, typically when working with children or vulnerable adults. If, for example, a child you were interviewing indicated to you that they were being abused, it would not be in the interests of the child's wellbeing and safety to avoid divulging this information. Should you be working with participants like these, it is absolutely essential that you inform them and/or those consenting on their behalf of the circumstances in which you would need to break confidentiality and anonymity.

Application to LGBT Research: The considerations of setting which apply when informing participants also apply here, in order to avoid 'outing' LGBT participants without their permission. If you are recruiting for a piece of LGBT research through an institution or organisation there is an extra level of risk. It is possible that, for example, a workplace might ask you to disclose which of their staff took part in your research. Providing this information would be a breach of confidentiality and anonymity regardless of who was taking part, but could be especially damaging for LGBT participants who might not feel safe being known to be LGBT in that environment or who may worry that being outed would put their job or career prospects at risk.

3.6: How do I intend to store the data?

In order to preserve confidentiality, you will need to store the data in such a way that it cannot be accessed by anyone outside of the research. Digital documents and recordings can be stored in password-protected folders, while physical documents can be placed in a locked cabinet. You should aim to destroy the data (by deleting or shredding as appropriate) after an agreed period of time, so that records of the information given to you by participants do not remain long after the project is complete.

3.7: How can I ensure confidentiality and anonymity in funded research?

If you are conducting a piece of funded research, it is important to understand how confidentiality and anonymity applies to your funder. Your funder may require that you collect data from particular recommended participants, in which case they cannot be guaranteed anonymity as the funder will know who they are. However, you can still assure them confidentiality, in that you will not disclose any information they provide outside of the research and will not directly attribute it to them. You may also be asked by your funder to provide feedback that you are not prepared to give in the interests of preserving confidentiality and anonymity. To avoid this, you should

have a discussion with your funder before beginning the research about the information that you are and are not prepared to give them. It may be useful to get their agreement to these conditions in writing.

Principle 4: Voluntary Participation, Free from Coercion

No participant should feel as though they are taking part in research against their will, at any stage of their involvement. It is therefore essential that participants are able to give their informed consent to take part in research and are given the right to withdraw their consent at any time. Ensuring that your participants can give informed consent means making sure that they are provided with sufficient information about the research, free from any element of coercion, so that they can make an informed and free decision on their involvement with the research. In this respect, this principle is strongly related to the principle of providing full information. Researchers are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

4.1: How can I ensure that participants are able to give informed consent?

First, ensure that you are adhering to the second principle: fully informing researchers and participants. This will ensure that any decisions your participants make are appropriately grounded in knowledge of the research. Whether you are using a written information sheet to inform your participants or plan to verbally inform them, ensure that information about the research has been appropriately delivered before you ask for consent. However you choose to inform your participants, make sure that it is easy to understand and accessible. You should also ensure that participants are given time to ask you any questions they might have about the research or their involvement before you ask them to give consent.

4.2: Do I know how to obtain informed consent from children and other vulnerable people?

When working with participants who may need to access support in deciding whether to participate, it is appropriate to ensure that they have time and opportunity to do so. As an example, you should give a child time to discuss their involvement in your research with a trusted adult, such as a parent or guardian. Specifically in the case of children, it is good practice to also gain permission from a responsible adult. This should be in addition to child consent, not instead of.

Application to LGBT Research: If you are researching an LGBT-related topic with mature children, such as teenage sexuality, seeking consent from parents or guardians could compromise the wellbeing of the child and jeopardise the research. In such circumstances, it may be appropriate to consider whether mature children can give consent for themselves without adult involvement, though if this is done then addressing any potential risk to participants must be made an absolute priority.

4.3: How do I avoid coercion?

It should be obvious that no researcher should actively coerce or force anybody to participate in their research, but coercion can manifest in other ways as well.

Unless otherwise indicated, participants may feel like they must continue their involvement in the research once they have begun, even if they become uncomfortable or no longer want to take part. Researchers must therefore allow participants to withdraw from the research at any time, making it very clear that they are permitted to do so, as failure to provide this information constitutes a form of coercion.

If you are using a reward to encourage participation, such as money or a gift card, make sure that the value is not so great that people would participate in the research purely to obtain the reward, as it then becomes a coercive practice. You must also avoid making reward eligibility contingent on participants answering all of your questions or completing their participation. Even if a participant wishes to withdraw halfway through, they should not forfeit their reward eligibility, otherwise this risks creating a situation where participants feel forced to answer questions or maintain their involvement for the sake of the reward.

4.4: Should I allow participants to withdraw their consent?

Generally speaking, participants should be allowed to withdraw their consent if they wish to, at which point any data they have provided should be fully removed from the research. However, it is understood that this often becomes impossible after the point at which data has been anonymised and/or already analysed. As such, it is appropriate to stipulate a cut-off date after which participants can no longer withdraw their consent, as long as this is clearly communicated and explained.

4.5: How do I obtain proof of consent?

You will typically need to produce a written consent form for your participants to read and sign, so that you have evidence that informed consent was given. This should be easy to understand and accessible. In terms of content, it should cover all of the issues previously addressed in this section, asking participants to sign off on the following questions:

- Have they read the information sheet/been verbally informed by the researcher?
- Do they understand the purpose of the research and what they are being asked to do?
- Have they had time to ask any questions they might have about the research?
- In the case of children and vulnerable people, have they been given the opportunity to discuss their involvement with a trusted adult?
- Do they understand that they can withdraw from the research at any time, without forfeiting reward eligibility where appropriate?
- Do they understand that they can withdraw their consent by an agreed date, should they wish to remove their involvement from the research?

In the case of participants who are not literate, it is appropriate to obtain verbal consent in place of using a written consent form, but a recorded written sign-off from a witness should also be obtained where possible.

Sometimes, the methods you are using might make it difficult to obtain proof of consent. For example, a telephone interview presents challenges in that you cannot physically present your interviewee with any written material and you may not be able to record verbal consent. In such circumstances, you might consider sending a consent form to potential interviewees ahead of the interview. If you are using an online survey, you also cannot physically present a written document to your respondents, but you can dedicate a page of the survey to answering the same consent questions. This page can then function as your consent form. Try to think of ways to address the issues your methods present in terms of obtaining proof of consent.

4.6: Am I aware of when it might be inappropriate to seek proof of consent?

Though it should be stressed that this only applies to a minority of projects, researchers should be aware that there are some circumstances in which seeking proof of consent might not be appropriate. Some research topics make obtaining proof of consent extremely impractical or meaningless, such as research on crowd behaviour. Not obtaining consent is a key part of covert research, in which individuals are purposefully not informed of their involvement, but it must be acknowledged that such research is only ever considered acceptable when it can be proven that participant awareness (and therefore consent) significantly alters the phenomenon being investigated. Finally, in some circumstances obtaining written consent may create unnecessary risks for participants, most often in the case of research with illegal groups. In such circumstances, a researcher should still try and ask participants for their consent in order to establish trust and security, but traditional consent procedures (such as asking for a written signature) might be avoided so as not to endanger participants.

Application to LGBT Research: Certain pieces of LGBT research may fit one of these conditions. For example, your research might focus on individuals who are in the country having fled persecution for being LGBT and may be at risk of being deported. In such cases, it might be appropriate to avoid obtaining proof of consent in ways which could identify your participants.

Principle 5: Avoiding Harm

Whether it is physical, mental or emotional, researchers should take great care to ensure that participants are not harmed as a result of their involvement. Researchers should operate with the view that no research is entirely free of potential for harm. It may not always be possible to eliminate these risks entirely, but there are ways that they can be mitigated. Researchers are encouraged to ask themselves the following questions:

5.1: What sensitivities are involved in my research?

Some research subjects are quite clearly sensitive, such as those concerning discrimination or abuse, but it should be acknowledged that all research topics are likely to involve some degree of sensitivity. You must determine how sensitive your research might be, so that those involved do not feel uncomfortable or negatively affected by participating. Think in broad terms; all of your participants will have different life experiences, so the topic might be sensitive to a participant for reasons that might not be immediately obvious to you. Bear these sensitivities in mind when designing, communicating and conducting your research.

Application to LGBT Research: Think about the specific ways that your research topic might affect LGBT communities. In what ways might discrimination be involved in the subject you are investigating? The same broad approach should be taken here, as discrimination can manifest in many ways that may not be immediately obvious. You must also ensure that the research itself is designed in a sensitive manner. Is the language you are using LGBT-inclusive and appropriate? Many resources exist detailing the kind of language to favour and avoid when working with particular groups. These can be found online, through charities, within research literature etc. Additionally, try to make sure that you do not ask anything of your participants that could be considered offensive, disrespectful or invasive.

5.2: What can I do to help preserve the wellbeing of those participating in sensitive research?

First, ensure that your research adheres to the principle of voluntary participation, making it very clear to participants that they are allowed to withdraw from the research at any point. This ensures that participants are knowingly involving themselves in the research, helps to establish trust and offers a clear way out should they become uncomfortable. Try to identify some relevant support services that you can direct participants towards if any aspect of the research causes them distress. These can be with external organisations or within your own organisation if applicable.

As mentioned previously, remember that you have a duty of care as a researcher, especially when working with particularly vulnerable participants like children. If a

participant gives you any indication that they are currently being harmed (such as declaring that they are experiencing abuse), it may be unethical to withhold this information and you may be required to break confidentiality in order to safeguard the participant in question. Try to anticipate whether there is any chance of this happening in your research and ensure that participants are told what the procedure is should it occur. If you feel obligated to break confidentiality at any point, it is essential that you discuss this with the participant.

5.3: What can I do to help preserve the wellbeing of those conducting the research?

Remember that the sensitivities of your research topic can affect researchers just as much as participants. The research team will be collecting and analysing all the data generated through the research. This means you will be spending a lot of time working with information that, on some projects, may be uncomfortable or distressing. Try to ensure that your research team is fully briefed on the topic, that everyone is aware of the risks involved and that everyone has an opportunity to indicate if there are any tasks that they would not be willing to undertake. Where appropriate, ensure that your research team has access to the same support services that you would signpost participants towards if they were feeling upset.

5.4: How can I avoid harm with respect to the methods I am using?

All research methods have some potential for harm, so you should consider this when choosing how you will conduct your research. For questionnaires and surveys, try to ensure that what you produce is as accessible as possible (has a readable font, avoids specialist language, can be translated/interpreted/verbally communicated), uses appropriate language and asks appropriate questions. Be aware of the potential for negative or offensive responses, especially if distributing your survey online. These considerations also apply to interviews, though for this method you must also try to ensure that there is mutual respect between interviewer and participant. The same can be said for focus groups, though here you should try to ensure that there is respect amongst the group members themselves as well. Similar considerations will be likely be present with all methods, so consider how your method has potential to cause harm and how you might address it if it is not listed here. Finally, adhere to the principles of voluntary participation and confidentiality when quoting from your data, to ensure that you have permission to do so and that participant identity is protected when you do.

5.5: How can I avoid harm with respect to funded research?

The response to this question should consider all of the ethical issues regarding funded research that have previously been outlined. As much as possible, you should try to ensure that your funding body is as committed to upholding ethical research standards as you are. Knowing what your funder expects from the research is critical to avoiding harm. Make sure that once complete, the research will not be exploited and will be put to good use by your funder. Inform participants about who is

funding your research and why, so they are able to make their own judgements about being involved. Finally, ensure that your funder respects anonymity and confidentiality and does not wish to gain information about participants that they would not otherwise be given.

Further information

For further information about the topics covered in this guide, please contact research@lgbt.foundation.