Ethical Considerations in User Research

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User Research is much more than a set of interviews

GENERATIVE/ EXPLORATORY RESEARCH	DESCRIPTIVE METHODS	EVALUATIVE METHODS	CAUSAL METHODS
When there is no clear idea of the problem to solve	*When the problem is already defined*	*When a solution has been designed*	*Once the solution has been launched live*
Research Goal	**Research Goal**	**Research Goal**	**Research Goal**
Discover which problem to solve and for whom	Get ideas for possible solutions that address the problem	Test whether the solution works for target segments.	Understand cause-and-effect relationships of design and user behaviour
Research Methods	**Research Methods**	**Research Methods**	**Research Methods**
• Ethnography • Interviews • Diary Studies • Testing + analytics (existing products) • Desk research	• Observation • Interviews • Benchmarking • Best Practices	• User Testing (several types) • Experiments	• Data Analytics • A/B or multivariate tests • User Testing • Experiments

Inspired by: Erika Hall (2013), Just Enough Research

Many organizations have design teams who are conducting **user research on a regular basis**.

The popularity of some methods (Lean UX, Design Thinking, etc) means that **many of those doing user research have no formal research background**.

Any research involving human participants has the potential to cross over ethical boundaries if done poorly.

A big **power**, a huge **responsibility**

Researchers are responsible for:
- Deliver high quality research:
  - Rigorous
  - Accurate
  - Original
  - Honest
  - Transparent
  - Making discoveries for the benefit of the company and the society
  - Improving knowledge

- Participants' wellbeing, for representing them honestly, and for keeping their personal information safe.

WITH GREAT **POWER** COMES GREAT **RESPONSIBILITY**
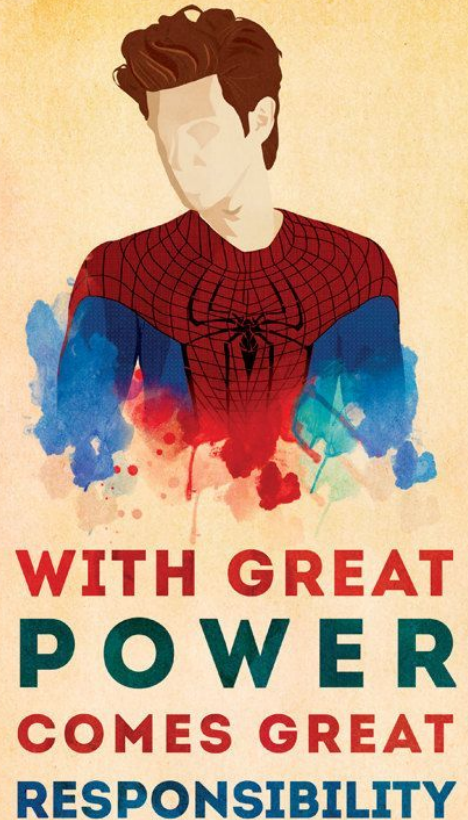
Happy path   Different cases   Edge cases

What means being **ethical in user research?**

No universal definition of ethical research.

Ethics have a cultural background.

No clear regulations when you conduct user research for a private company.

- **Every single situation has the potential to be an 'ethical challenge'**

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"Research ethics is the **careful** consideration of the rights, well-being, and dignity of **people involved in research activities**"

Source: Ethical Maturity in User Research. NN/g

Why we should consider being more **ethical in user research?**

One common reason that internal corporate research—such as product testing—is not often subject to ethics review is that most UX research is done on anonymous data, or data without any PII.

However, **even when data is anonymous, this doesn't mean that people aren't affected.** The main concern is always balancing the risks and rewards of a given study.

Why we should consider being more **ethical in user research?**

The more practical reason is that you need to protect your **reputation** with your customers and for posterity.

- **Case study: Facebook (2012)** They 'altered' the news feeds of 670,000+ Facebook users just to measure happier or sadder reactions (emotional contagion)
- When the research became public, it caused outrage (84% lost trust in Facebook, The Guardian poll)

"To Facebook, we are all lab rats"

—Vindu Goel, emerging platforms editor on the Audience team at The New York Times

Source: Facebook Tinkers With Users' Emotions in News Feed Experiment, Stirring Outcry. The New York Times (June 29, 2014).

We should focus on **practices!**

Anyone doing research with people should have a good understanding and execution of research ethics.

- We should be **respectful and compassionate to study participants**. (honest and open in communication, sensitive to different scenarios and emotional responses)
- We should **respect our stakeholders and colleagues**, and the resources and trust they give our work (unbiased interpretations).
- We should respect the norms associated with social science and research using human subjects, including all studies using methods that have defined protocols providing **informed consent**.

"As a researcher, you don't get an ethical free pass because a user checked a box next to a link to a website's terms of use (...) Researchers will even quiz participants after presenting the informed consent information to make sure they really understand."

—Max Masnick, Software architect & epidemiologist

Source: Facebook emotion study breached ethical guidelines, researchers say. The Guardian (June 30, 2014).

Six common issues we need to watch out

- Vulnerable populations
- Misleading Users/Deception
- Inadvertent sensitive topics/extreme experiences
- False expectations
- No idea how to use the findings/misinterpreted findings
- Information misuse

Source: Ethical Considerations In UX Research: The Need For Training And Review. Smashing Magazine (December 9, 2020).

Vulnerable people

Children, chronic illness, ethnic or racial minorities, economically disadvantaged, people with diminished capacity or low literacy.

Special justification is required for inviting vulnerable individuals to serve as research subjects and, if they are selected, the means of protecting their rights and welfare must be strictly applied.

Credit: Taylor Heery.

In general, **remember that participants are people, not 'test subjects'.**

- Avoid words that make our study sound like a test or experiment, so people won't feel like they are subjects of an experiment.

- Always remember the human aspect of the study and help alleviate any nervousness people may feel, especially when they may feel they are not performing well.

- Respect participants' personal space.

For studies with **minors**, administer a consent form that requires the signature of the minor's parent or guardian.

- With minors, it is imperative that we have custodial permission before allowing them to participate.

- Try to minimize the amount of information that parents or guardians must fill in.

- Provide a copy of the signed minor consent form to the participant's parents or guardians when they bring their child to the session.

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Be kind and sensitive to individuals who are **mentally or physically challenged**, without feeling awkward.

- Maintain a neutral, but cordial, demeanor.

- Do not comment on what we may consider unusual mannerisms or appearance. Although a disability is an integral part of who they are, it alone does not define them.

- Don't make them into disability heroes or victims—treat them as individuals.

Misleading users / Deception

Remember the **Milgram's shock experiment**? Milgram felt the need to deceive research participants was essential to collecting valid data.

You need to account for any potential deception or stress your participants will encounter. You need to be explicit on how are you safeguarding your participant.

Credit: Yale University Manuscripts and Archives. Participants in one of Stanley Milgram's experiments regarding obedience to authority.

- What role am I asking the user to play in this study and why?
- Am I able to adequately explain the purpose of the research in a way that justifies the need?
- What expectations am I creating in the participant through their participation in the research?
- What, if any, mental harm or stress could come from someone participating in this study?
- If there is the potential for harm or stress, how will I deal with this?
- How honest and open will I be with participants with results?
- **How will I respond to a participants' request to end the research?**

The situation

You're running a usability research session. The participant becomes a bit hesitant when you mention that they need to enter their personal account information to run the test in a realistic setting. When they ask if this is what everyone does, you simply assure the safety of the platform by replying, "Yes, every participant has done this. It's perfectly secure."

Was it ethical?

No. You're not explicitly telling the participant that they are unable to withdraw.

Moreover, dismissing their apprehension and not explicitly letting them know they can withdraw is also unethical.

Exceptions

Being blatantly honest about the research can damage the quality of the data by leading the respondent. The participant needs to know just enough to provide unadulterated feedback. This does not mean a researcher should actively tell false truths, but a **lie-by-omission** can be a necessary tool in user research.

No impact on the well-being of the respondent means not an ethical violation.

Inadvertent Sensitive Topics / Extreme Experiences

We need to be prepared for how you will deal with emotional responses, especially on sensitive topics:

- This includes you (the researcher) needing to reflect proper empathy.

- This includes letting people have emotional outbursts and giving them time to recover.

- **Don't conduct the research if you cannot handle situations involving human emotions and unpredictable responses.**

Credit: Nik Shuliahin.

- Is research appropriately designed so as to mitigate negative impacts and distress on the participants?

- Would participants in our study be exposed to risks that are greater than those encountered in everyday life?

- Do users leave our sessions the same or better off after attending the research?

- If conducting research on sensitive subjects (trauma, mental health, illness, bereavement, addictions), do we have resources for support available for participants?

False Expectations

We need to be prepared to address inaccurate expectations and redirect the conversation in a sensitive way that will still allow us to have a rapport with the participant and gain valuable insights.

- **Importance of getting a diverse sample while recruiting.**

- Provide recruiters participants' detailed guidelines for who you are trying to reach.

- You can still reset expectations in the opening of your study's protocol

Credit: Rostyslav Savchyn.

- Consider gracefully ending a session if we sense that a participant is uncomfortable and hesitates to ask to be excused.

- Plan in advance how we might stop a session if we become aware that someone is having a negative reaction.

No idea how to use/interpret the findings

We are wasting everyone's time if we are simply asking questions because we can, or because we think the insights might be interesting.

We respect our research participants and our colleagues when we create studies that are purposeful and focused.

Credit: Kaleidico.

- What are the question(s) our study is trying to answer?

- What hypotheses do we have about the answer to these questions?

- What specific questions will we ask on our study?

- What type(s) of data will our study generate?

- How will we analyze this data?

- How will our findings and recommendations be used?

Information misuse

We need to inform users prior to their participation on whether their information will be kept or destroyed.

- Are we having users enter potential sensitive information?

Researchers must consider how information will be kept and stored for future access.

We should define a reasonable amount of time for data retention and destroy participant data on a regular schedule.

Credit: Christa Dodoo.

Information misuse

Provide repeated assurance that we will report participant data anonymously.

- Participants are entitled to anonymity, including in video clips.
- Reiterating that we are protecting privacy increases participants' comfort with speaking more freely, for which we'll be rewarded with more reliable data.

Be sure to quote participants and report their data accurately and anonymously.

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The situation

You just conducted a usability session testing a website for a large retailer's digital team. You have a friend who works at the retailer as an accountant, and you discuss the research participant casually, outside of work.

Was it ethical?

While this may seem innocuous, particularly because your friend works for the client, it is unethical.

You are privately relaying research-related information to an individual not involved with or affected by the research.

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Starter kit to be more ethical in user research

- **Guidance documents or Research Protocol:** how to collect consent, how to write good consent forms and information sheets, as well as how to approach researching certain topics or user types.
- **Standardized consent forms**: Mature organizations have standardized study documents which contain areas where researchers can fill in the details about the study, while keeping the core language consistent. Create all participant forms in plain, understandable language.
- **Personal data** produced during or from user research activities, where it gets stored, and how it is/will be handled.
- **Peer review, if possible,** of all research protocols.

Assess the **maturity** of our practices along the way

Write your own **code of conduct** or adopt a professional body's code of conduct, and direct user researchers to this document.

- This might include formalized mentoring programs for researchers (mid-term)
- Ethics Review Board (long-term)

Reference: [Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct](#), American Psychological Association

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Source: Ethical Maturity in User Research. NN/g

"There is no future, only lava everywhere"
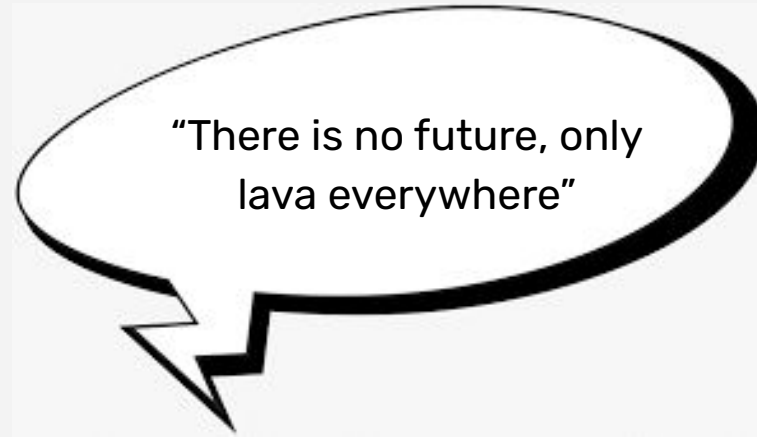
'They've lost their whole life'

'Everyone is devastated here. If they're not depressed they're on the brink'

'Many break down and cry; they are people of all ages and they've lost everything'

'People have lost everything, not only their homes. They have ceased to have a reference. Imagine being from a place and having nowhere to go.'

Bonus track: what about our researchers?

User research isn't something you can do from a distance. To get valuable insights you have to get up close and personal with your users - this can also expose us to risks.

- **Psychological risks.** They're intangible, quick to overlook and easy to underestimate.
- **Compassion Fatigue** = second-hand trauma experienced by those who are exposed to or who witness another person's trauma.
- CF can lead to reduced empathy and feeling either inappropriately hypersensitive or insensitive to further exposure to stories that may have depleted our compassion in the first place.

Compassion Fatigue spreads like a virus

Psychological

- Feeling helpless when hearing a difficult client story
- Imposter syndrome
- Anger and irritability
- Emotional exhaustion
- Depression
- Flashbacks
- Suicidal thoughts
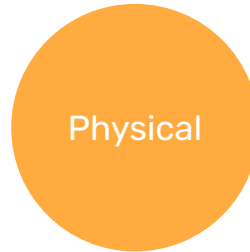
Physical

- Headaches
- Heart palpitations
- Weight loss
- Insomnia and/or nightmares
- Extreme tiredness

Behavioural

- Unhealthy routines
- Isolation, avoiding colleagues and staff gatherings

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Psychological safety is also ethics

Emotional wellbeing is largely about resilience - the ability to cope with and bounce back from stressful situations and experiences.

- After conducting research on sensitive topics, are researchers provided with access to free counseling, if they need it?
- Are researchers provided with basic training on how to remain safe when conducting research in the field?

Building resiliency for researchers

When you find methods to manage this stress, company resilience increases. A high level of resilience means we're better prepared to deal with stressful events when they occur.

- **Open communication as a team** = short debriefs after sessions to share thoughts.
- **Code of ethics**. What are our company's values? What are our research practice's values? How do we track progress? What lines won't we cross?
- **Physical (safe) spaces and protocols** for decompression and rest.
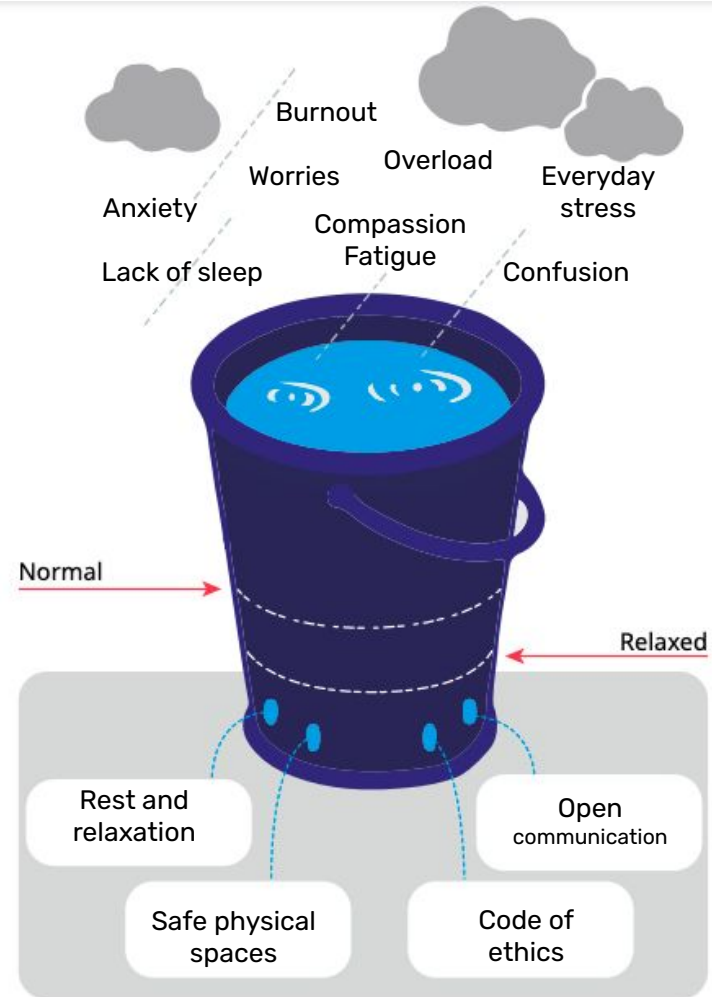
# Self-care tips for researchers

Taking the time to check in with ourselves and look for signs that we may need to take a step back is critical to doing good human-centered work.

- Take notes on how you feel before and after each interview or session.
- Monitor the symptoms and take action before you start feeling too burned out.
- Feeling vulnerability is ok. Have those 1-2 people, either in your professional space or your personal space, that you know you can always be 100% vulnerable and honest with.
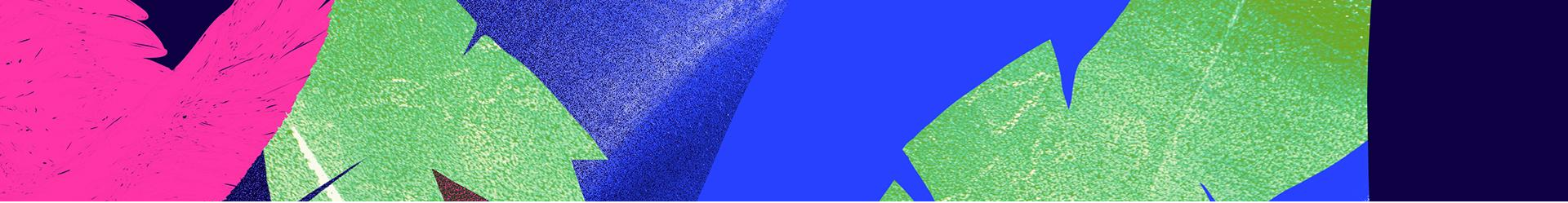
Put your mask on first!

You won't be able to understand people without taking care of yourself first.
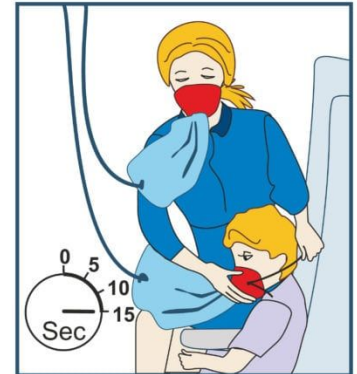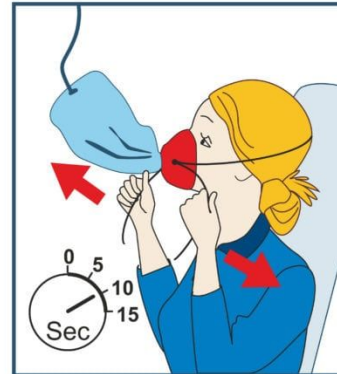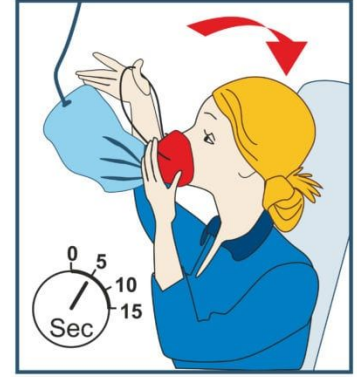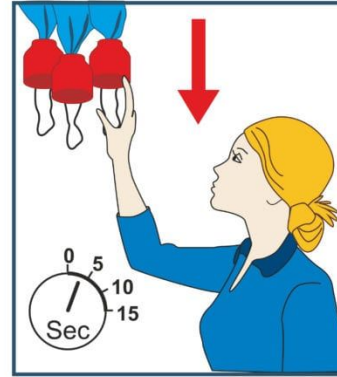
"We've been seen as part of the product and tech industry, but we are actually — and should see ourselves as — **part of the human services industry.**"

– Vivianne Castillo

Thank you!

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