

Institute of Family Therapy Malta

Research Ethics Code

This Research Ethics Code outlines the principles, standards, and procedures governing all research activities undertaken within the Institute of Family Therapy Malta (IFTM), applicable to all training programmes with a special emphasis on the Masters in Parental Alienation Studies (Level 7), the Master's in Systemic Psychotherapy (Level 7) and the Doctorate in Systemic Practice (Level 8). It aligns with and reflects best practices adopted by European universities, while being tailored to the distinct epistemology and practice of systemic psychotherapy and systemic research.

1. Preamble and Purpose

The Institute of Family Therapy Malta upholds the highest standards of research ethics and integrity. The purpose of this Code is to ensure that all research conducted under the auspices of the Institute is ethical, rigorous, respectful, and socially responsible. Research in systemic psychotherapy and systemic practice inherently engages with relational, social, and cultural systems, and therefore demands particular ethical sensitivity to power, context, and reflexivity.

2. Scope and Applicability

This Code applies to all students, supervisors, and staff engaged in research associated with the Master's and Doctoral programmes of the Institute. It covers all stages of the research process, from conception and design through to dissemination and publication, including applied clinical and practice-based research.

3. Fundamental Ethical Principles

All research must be grounded in the following principles:

- Respect for Persons and Systems
- Beneficence and Non-Maleficence
- Justice and Fairness
- Integrity and Honesty
- Transparency and Accountability
- Confidentiality and Data Protection
- Reflexivity and Awareness of Power Dynamics

4. Research Planning and Design

Researchers must ensure that ethical considerations are integral to research design and planning. Supervisors must guide students in identifying potential ethical issues early in the process and in seeking appropriate ethical approval. All researchers must undertake

relevant training in research ethics. The Institute of Family Therapy Malta commits itself to provide such training for its students and staff on all Programmes.

5. Recruitment, Access, and Informed Consent

Researchers must obtain voluntary, informed consent from all participants.

Consent must be based on clear and accessible information regarding the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of the study.

Special attention must be given to obtaining consent in relational contexts, such as family interviews or therapy sessions, where multiple members may be involved and where relational confidentiality must be maintained.

6. Data Collection, Storage, and Protection

Data must be collected, stored, and managed in compliance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and Maltese data protection law.

Identifiable information must be securely stored, and pseudonymisation or anonymisation should be applied where possible.

Recordings and transcripts must be handled with strict confidentiality, and participants must be informed about data storage and disposal.

7. Research Relationships and Power Dynamics

Researchers must reflect on their position and power within the research relationship.

Dual roles, such as therapist-researcher, must be avoided, but if engaged in must be carefully managed to avoid conflicts of interest or harm to participants.

Reflexive practice and research supervision are essential throughout the research process.

8. Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Reporting

Researchers must analyse and present findings honestly and transparently, avoiding fabrication, falsification, or selective reporting.

Interpretations should be grounded in evidence and reflexively acknowledge the researcher's influence in meaning-making.

Limitations should be openly discussed.

9. Dissemination and Publication

Research results should be disseminated responsibly, giving appropriate credit to all contributors.

Authorship must reflect actual contributions.

Researchers are encouraged to make their findings accessible through open channels where appropriate, and to communicate results respectfully in public and professional domains.

10. Research Integrity and Misconduct

Misconduct includes fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, and unethical authorship practices.

Any suspected breaches of research integrity will be investigated by the Institute according to fair and transparent procedures.

Confirmed misconduct may result in disciplinary action and withdrawal of academic awards.

11. Ethical Review and Oversight

All research projects involving human participants must receive prior approval from the Institute's Research Ethics Committee (REC).

The REC evaluates applications for ethical soundness, participant welfare, and data protection compliance.

Any amendments to approved projects must also be submitted for review.

12. Specific Considerations for Systemic Psychotherapy and Practice Research

Given the relational nature of systemic research, particular care must be taken when confidentiality and consent intersect within families or systems.

Researchers must balance transparency and sensitivity, especially when working with vulnerable individuals, minors, or clients in therapy.

Ethical reflection on language, culture, and social positioning must be continuous.

13. Programme-Level Expectations

At Master's level, research should demonstrate rigorous ethical awareness, appropriate supervision, and adherence to approved methodologies.

At Doctoral level, researchers must show leadership in ethical research practice, contribute new knowledge to the field, and model high standards of integrity and reflexivity.

14. Roles and Responsibilities

Researchers are responsible for the ethical conduct of their work.

Supervisors are responsible for mentoring ethical competence and ensuring compliance with this Code.

The Institute is responsible for maintaining robust structures for ethics review, training, and oversight.

15. Training, Monitoring, and Continuous Improvement

Ethics and integrity training are mandatory for all students and supervisors.

The Institute will periodically review and improve its ethics processes, integrating feedback from staff, students, and external developments in research governance.

16. Appeals, Complaints, and Sanctions

Researchers have the right to appeal decisions of the Research Ethics Committee or disciplinary actions.

Complaints will be handled confidentially, fairly, and in accordance with institutional policy and MFHEA expectations.

17. Review and Revision of the Code

This Code will be reviewed to ensure continued alignment with national and European standards for research ethics and integrity.