

ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE OF THE SOCIAL SCIENCES ETHICAL PROCEDURE AND QUESTIONS

November 1, 2018

The Ethics Review Committee of the Social Sciences has put in place a procedure for the ethical review of research plans. The aim is for you to devote time and effort to thinking through and making explicit how your research plans will lead to good research, not only in a methodological sense but also in another sense, call it social, ethical, aesthetic or something else.

This document was created to support the ethical reflection on new research projects and, if needed, grant permission to conduct them. It contains a background text that will help you to design your research in an ethical way and to compose your ethics section.

Beware. The idea is not for you to present us with forms, or to flag up rules that you promise to observe. Instead of adding to formalities, we seek to foster reflection and care. The ideal ethics section is one in which you articulate and address the real, true and sometimes irreducible problems that you face. In order to support that, this document poses questions rather than provide answers.

A. How to decide whether asking for ethical permission is required or might be wise.

1. You must have the committee's permission if:

- a. Your research might have a direct impact on the lives of your research informants (e.g. because their life world is interfered with; it may be dangerous for them to work with you; their privacy is at stake).
- b. Your research methods may pose a danger or serious practical problems for yourself, your junior colleagues or research assistants.
- c. Your research is situated in fields of clashing interests (between e.g. an institution and its clients, governing bodies and groups being governed, industry and activists, and so on) that deserve to be handled with care;
- d. Your own interests may clash with those of others concerned.

When in doubt about whether to ask for ethical permission, read section B. If your research is 'standard', permission will usually be granted. If there are difficulties to attend to, however, the ethics committee will engage in a dialogue with you.

A caveat. Some grant givers want to see written ethical permission before they will provide funds, and in some fields journals ask for written proof of ethical permission to conduct a study before they publish its results. Within the university, written permission has a legal status as soon as questions of insurance arise. The Ethics Review Committee is willing to work with you to meet these bureaucratic requirements, but is eager to avoid turning ethics into yet another bureaucratic (and potentially void) ritual. The idea behind seeking and granting ethical approval is not to get everyone to tick a few boxes and to follow set rules, but for us to invest, time and again, the effort required to realise research that is good in that it does not just gather true facts, but also works in ways that are decent, fair, honest, respectful, and so on.

B. Background text that will help you to design your research in an ethical way and to compose your ethics section

The Ethics Review Committee will read your explanations of how you hope to ensure the decency, fairness, honesty, respectfulness, etc. of your research. When necessary, we will ask you questions, make suggestions or point to possibilities that other researchers have explored.

When we read your research plan, we hope to learn what the research is about, what questions it will ask, in what settings it will be carried out, which methods you will use, etc. But we are also eager

to read your explicit reflections on the ethical side of your work. So please send us a text about your research that you wrote for other purposes (grant application, 8th month paper, etc.). And please flag up where we can find its ethics section, or add such a section.

The following set of questions will help you to write an ethics section. Remember that there is never just one 'good' answer. Not all questions are necessarily relevant in your case. And there are often tensions to face (e.g. between anonymity and openness). We hope that with everyone's concerted efforts, we will be able to collectively assemble intelligence on what might be good research under the highly varied circumstances and in the highly varied settings in which social science researchers do their highly varied research.

Please be concise when you answer the following questions. Give short answers – and only answer the questions that are relevant in your particular case.

1 Who and what

1a. Social science research frequently involves working with informants, participants or interviewees – and their rights are to be respected. How will you recruit these people? Will you be working through other institutions (e.g. healthcare; schools)? If so, how will you make clear your relative independence of these institutions (which will not treat those who participate in your research differently from those who do not)? Are you thinking of handing out money or other rewards? If so, why? What consequences will this have? What alternatives might there be? What other issues of decency will arise at this point and how will you handle them?

1b. If in your research you work with publically available data, if you study built environments, infrastructures or practices (e.g. transportation practices), or if otherwise you do not directly depend on people and their willingness to talk with you: how will you still incorporate in your questions respect for the interests and concerns of those whose lives your work may affect?

1c. How do your research questions address, reflect on, critique or otherwise relate to the concerns of the various people to whom your research pertains? How do your concerns map onto or clash with those of relevant others?

2 Relating in research

2a. Will your information gathering have the potential to harm people? If so, do you intend to protect your research subjects/informants (etc.) against the potential negative consequences of their participation? If so, how? If not, why not? This may become pressing in situations where your informants are 'undercover' (e.g. illegal) and/or where states or other organisations are at least as curious about them as you are. What kinds of risk reducing measures will you take? What other harms might there be in store for them, and how will you avoid and/or reduce these harms? If the latter: does the goal merit the risks?

2b. How will you explain your research and its purposes?

2c. Will you ask people for their consent to be researched? If so, what exactly will you ask them to consent to? What about your research procedure or the use of your research will you share with them or leave open? If you would like ask for signatures on forms, do you think that is indeed wise: what kind of burden might that represent locally, and is that burden warranted? If you do want to work with forms, which shape do you give these? If paperwork is not opportune in the settings where you will be working, in which other way will you show you are respectful?

2d. Will you guarantee anonymity alongside consent or instead of consent? If so, Will you guarantee anonymity alongside or instead of consent? If so, how will you ensure anonymity? By using pseudonyms in note making or in reports and/or by altering irrelevant details about people in your texts? Providing anonymity may come at the cost of a lack of openness about your sources. Is that relevant in your case? If so, how do you intend to handle this tension? What do you do when people want to have their names used? Or when they are public figures whose identity cannot be hidden? (Compare with 3a and 3b.)

2e. What extra activities will you engage in if your research subjects/informants are minors, or are in a more vulnerable position or are less able to understand what is going on?

2f. Will you find yourself in a situation where your work is 'undercover' and not something to discuss in so many words during the process of research? If so, how will you still ensure decency and fairness?

2g. And if you will not directly face and talk with the people to whom your research pertains, how will you attend to their interests and concerns?

2h. Your responsibility does not end with shifting decisions and choices to your research subjects/informants. How will you avoid or reduce the risk that your research process will harm them? That is, what will you do to protect your research subjects/informants against the potential negative consequences of their participation? What might such negative consequences be? 2i. How will you protect yourself and other researchers and research assistants involved against potential negative consequences of the research process?

Situations of illegality come to mind here. But the risks may also be social (e.g. being confronted with violence or risking rape) or mental/psychological. If this is relevant in your case, what kind of personal and emotional preparations and support will you organise for researchers (assistants, participating students, etc.)?

3 After assembling

3a. How will you deal with the materials you have assembled? Once you have data, there may be tensions here between keeping these hidden to ensure the privacy of respondents/informants or sharing them with fellow researchers and/or other publics. How will you juggle keeping sensitive issues from inquisitive eyes with proving enough openness to assure others of the truthfulness of your results? In other words, how will you handle the potential tension between the ethical idea of data protection and the integrity ideal of data sharing?

3b. If you intend to open your data, when will you do so – immediately, or after a certain embargo time? Will others be able and invited to use them? Will you also preserve your data for later reuse (e.g. after a few decades)? Or will it be better in your case to destroy your rough materials so that the original research subjects/informants are better protected, or for another reason (if so, which reason)? Here, the same tensions arise but as the time line is longer, specificities may change.

3c. How will you work with the data you gather? How will you do justice to them, both in the sense of bringing out true results and in that of attending to relevant concerns?

4 Publishing

4a. How will you explain and lay out the methods that you use to gather, treat and analyse your data? What, in your case, are the relevant ethical issues in this context?

4b. Where, when and for whom will you publish? Where do you think your work should be circulated and in which language(s)? How does this relate to your concerns, to the concerns of your research subjects/informants, and/or to what is relevant in the practices that you studied?

4c. How will you ensure, overall, that your publications will be good in the ethical sense of the word? Are you sure that they will not harm those who have put their trust in you? Have you considered what might happen to your results, what others might do with them? Have you taken into account what role you might play in this? If you take criticism to be opportune, will it be clearly directed, well-argued and, where relevant, respectful of the individuals concerned?

The Ethics Review Committee of the Social Science

The Ethics Review Committee of the Social Science of the FSW consists of social science researchers (Dr Erik Bähre, Dr Roos van der Haer, Dr Wolfgang Kaltenbrunner) who, when necessary, call on the advice of third parties. They represent various disciplinary and methodological backgrounds. The committee is coordinated by Petra van der Weel. See also the Regulations of the Ethics Review Committee.