Guideline: ETHICS AND ETHICAL SELF-REFLECTION IN RESEARCH PROJECTS [[1]](#footnote-1)

### General information

Research ethics formulates basic principles of morally appropriate action for empirical research practice, focusing on the relationship between researchers and participants.

*Research ethics is understood here as an orientation framework for researchers to reflect their practice, whereby this framework not only includes questions of good scientific practice and considers legal frameworks but goes even further. At the center are reflections on the principles and values that guide research actions.*

Research ethics principles relate to the relationship of researchers to each other, to the participants in research projects, and to society in general.

Research can harm individuals, groups or society in general. Wagner (2017: 5) mentions as negative consequences of research results e.g., the negative reputation of a specific group of people (e.g. (re)production of stereotypes) or competitive disadvantages for companies, if e.g., problems or grievances have been revealed. **The aim of research ethics standards and regulations is to guide research activities in a way that avoids such harms as far as possible, while at the same time ensuring freedom of research and enabling good research.** The aim must be to achieve a justifiable and balanced relationship between the possible harm and the expected benefit of the research.

Research ethics reflections or reviews of research projects in the social and economic sciences are increasingly required in the international context and e.g., also for projects in the European funding program Horizon Europe1. The present document is intended to provide orientation in this regard.

There are no unambiguous answers to questions of research ethics. The aim of research ethics reflections is to become aware of these problems and to weigh them up pragmatically in individual cases. Ethical aspects of:

1. Scientific quality and integrity of the researchers,

2. Avoidance of harm/protection of participants,

3. Informed consent.

**SCIENTIFIC EXCELLENCE AND INTEGRITY OF THE RESEARCHERS**

The scientific quality and integrity of the researchers are described in the handbook for ensuring good scientific practice. In addition to the documentation of the methodology and data evaluation, this also includes the disclosure of commissioning and funding bodies, the naming of the study director and possible conflicts of interest. Ethically, it must be examined whether the complete publication of the data could be detrimental to the participants. Here, the principles of anonymization and pseudonymization must be observed (cf. leaflet on data protection in research) and the potential harm to the participants must be weighed against the gain in scientific knowledge.

### Avoiding harm/protection of the participating

Under this aspect, possible harm to the participants of their physical/psychological well-being as well as possible negative social, legal and economic consequences that could arise for the study participants in connection with the data collected from them (or even the situation of the survey or the way the questions are formulated) must be avoided.2 Compliance with data protection also falls under this aspect.

In principle, not only the individuals participating in the study but also the broader groups and communities to which they belong should be included in the consideration of the risk of potential harm. This is especially true for individuals (groups) who are particularly vulnerable (e.g., in legal terms such as refugees), especially vulnerable (e.g., children and youth), or socially disadvantaged. Defining harm is difficult and varies with the perspective of consideration. Similarly, protection also applies to the researcher as a person, e.g., when conducting potentially risky or psychologically stressful interviews.

### Informed Consent

The protection of personal rights requires that participants in a research project receive complete and comprehensible information about the aims and background of the project and are informed about the planned use of their data. The voluntary participation made on this basis is the central legitimization for the processing of personal data. Further information on informed consent can be found in the fact sheet on data protection in research.

In the case of secondary data provided by research data centers, research ethics self-reflection is generally not necessary, since the research ethics clearance check has already been carried out at the time of data collection.

**QUESTIONS FOR RESEARCH ETHICS SELF-REFLECTION**

The following questions are taken from the publication of the RatSWD (2017) and represent an exemplary guideline for research ethics self-reflection. They should be supplemented by questions about the specific project context as well as the exchange with peers and third parties/experts. Furthermore, the questions for ethical self-reflection in the context of Horizon 2020 applications are illustrated in Appendix A:

* To what extent are research ethics principles relevant to the present study? Will only anonymized data be analyzed secondarily? Has an ethics review already been carried out at another institution? If yes, a duplicate review is probably not necessary.
* Which existing code of ethics (or guideline) is relevant to my research? For example, some professional societies have published their own codes of research ethics, e.g., Code of Ethics of the German Sociological Association and the Professional Association of German Sociologists.
* What risks or potential harms (in psychological, physical, social, legal, or economic terms) might study participants face as a result of the study (during data collection or through analysis, publication, utilization, and archiving of the results)?
* Is a research project with particularly vulnerable people, e.g., children, planned?
* To what extent might the study harm or benefit the group to which the participants belong? For example, could the research project lead to meaningful self-knowledge, serious behavioral changes, psychological distress, or physical pain?
* Does the research project involve deception of participants, i.e., are research subjects not fully or accurately informed?
* What measures are taken to avoid potential harm?
* Does research also involve certain risks for the research subjects beyond what is common in everyday life? If so, what measures are taken to avoid or reduce them?
* Are the foreseeable risks associated with the study balanced against the expected benefits (knowledge gain, possibly also application benefits) promised by the study?
* What precautions are taken to identify and appropriately deal with unforeseeable research ethics challenges during the study?

**In the case of secondary data:**

1. are only anonymized data evaluated secondarily? If yes, an examination by a commission regarding the collection is most likely not necessary. However, the further use of the data must be reflected upon from the point of view of research ethics.

2. Has an ethics review already been carried out at another institution? If yes, it is likely that a duplicate review is not necessary. The fact that an ethical review has already been carried out at another institution does not automatically mean that the research is unproblematic from the point of view of research ethics, since different standards may be applied in other institutions, disciplines and countries.

3. If it becomes clear during a self-assessment that potential harm is to be expected, or if justified doubts about the ethical permissibility of a planned research project arise for some other reason, an exchange with colleagues should first be sought and this process documented. If reasonable doubt persists, it is recommended that the vote of an ethics committee be obtained. The documentation of the self-reflection (also with colleagues) is important, both as an attachment to third-party funding applications and as an aid for colleagues in future research projects.

4. The Senate of the IU reserves the right to appoint an ethics committee if necessary, or to appoint a corresponding committee (temporarily) in case of requests for ethical clearance.

### Sources

European Commission (ed.) (2018): Ethics and data protection. European Commission, 14 November 2018, online: http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/h2020/grants\_manual/hi/ethics/h2020\_hi\_ethics-data-protection\_en.pdf [accessed 12.12.2018].

Kämpfer, Eckard (2016). Risks of social science research? Research ethics, data protection, and privacy rights in the social and behavioral sciences. RatSWD Working Paper Series, No. 255, Council for Social and Economic Data, Berlin 2016.

RatSWD (ed.) (2017): Research ethics principles and review procedures in the social and economic sciences. 9th Output of the 5th Appointment Period, No. 9, Social and Economic Data Council, Berlin July 2017.

### Attachment

**Box 3: Notes on the review by the ethics committee**

In the following, we address some questions that frequently arise in the research ethics review of empirical studies in the social and economic sciences by ethics committees.

**1. Is data protection guaranteed and has it been approved by the responsible data protection commissioners?**

A research project may not and cannot be carried out without the consent of the data protection officer(s). Whether this review takes place only after ethics (self-)review cannot be answered in the abstract but depends on the concrete individual case.

**2 What documents must be available for the review?**

As a rule, the research project and its methodological procedure are described in detail and it is explained to what extent research ethics principles are guaranteed (such as the voluntary nature of participation, obtaining informed consent, etc.). This also includes assessing the risks involved in participating in the study and explaining what measures are taken to minimize these risks and avoid possible harm (e.g., confidentiality, anonymization strategies, etc.). However, procedures and required documentation vary from committee to committee.

**3.What if not all documents can be submitted yet?**

As a rule, an application for research ethics review is submitted before the research project begins. In many cases, not all documents could be submitted at this early stage. E.g., because individual methodological steps are only clarified during the research process. This is often the case with qualitative studies that are committed to the methodological principle of openness, and with longer-term/multiphase research projects in which subsequent steps build on transient phases (e.g., when results from focus groups are incorporated into the planning of a subsequent quantitative survey or into the development of an intervention). In such cases, the ethics committee should facilitate a process-based review and clarify which documents are required at the outset and which documents, if any, will be submitted subsequently and at what time.

**4. Must informed consent be obtained in every case, or are exceptions justifiable?**

The voluntary and informed consent of the participants is a central principle of research ethics, which is also legally justified (§ 4a BDSG).

As a rule, participants' consent is obtained in writing. In individual cases, however, it may be methodologically necessary and ethically justifiable to obtain consent orally (e.g., in qualitative studies in which the research situation does not permit obtaining written consent; in the case of analphabetic participants; or in the case of telephone expert interviews). In such cases, researchers should document oral informed consent (e.g., through an audio recording or field note).

However, in certain study designs, it is not possible to inform participants about the study and procedure and obtain informed consent, such as in certain experimental designs (field experiments, laboratory experiments) or ethnographic field research. In these cases, care should be taken to ensure that risks to participating subjects are minimal. For laboratory experiments, informed consent should be obtained following the experiment. For field experiments, consider involving selected members of the field' (e.g., representatives of a neighborhood or community being researched) in an advisory capacity (e.g., as part of a project advisory board) and informing the public following the experiment. In ethnographic field research (participant observation), key persons are usually informed, processes of informed consent of further persons are negotiated in a processual and dialogical manner and documented in field notes. However, it is generally not possible in field research (both experimental and ethnographic) to the same extent to obtain individual consent from all persons involved in the study in the broadest sense. This reveals a peculiarity of social science research, which, in contrast to clinical-medical research, does not conduct research exclusively with individuals, but also with collective units (e.g., neighborhoods, soccer stadiums, online communities, etc.).36

**5 Is it acceptable to deceive participants?**

Many experimental designs rely on leaving participants unaware of the exact experimental conditions for methodological reasons. In some cases, it is also necessary to actively deceive participants. This is only acceptable - if it does not contradict explicit rules of its subdiscipline, such as experimental economics - as long as the risks for participants are minimal. Deception should also be temporary. In laboratory research, participants should be informed about the deception and the experiment afterwards, and their consent should be obtained.

Generally, researchers should identify themselves as researchers when asked and do everything in their power to inform participants about the research activity after the data collection has been completed.

1. Based on: Council for Social and Economic Data (2017): Research ethics principles and review procedures in the social and economic sciences. Output Series No. 9, 5th Appeal Period, Berlin 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)