

Ethical Review Summary

School of International Relations

This document provides a basic guide to the Research Ethical Review process both within the School and the University. It outlines the basis for such reviews, what to consider when constructing a research design and when completing an application for review, and where to find additional resources on-line and within the School.

Why Ethical Review?

The Principal's Office requires, through the University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC), human subject research to be reviewed. More than that, the process is an important opportunity to consider the overall research design of a project, the contingencies for data collection and storage, and methods for ensuring confidentiality and rendering anonymous the identities of respondents. For supervisors it is also an excellent pedagogical tool, enabling the University's students to lay the basis for good ethical research which can be carried on throughout their lives. The process is not designed to hinder research. On the contrary it is designed to help people think about the ethical implications of research and to ensure that research is conducted in a manner that affords appropriate protection and is conducted with respect for respondents and third parties alike. The School of International Relations must be at the forefront of engaged social research.

Thus ethical review is intended to be positive. It is not designed to prevent people from conducting sound social research. It is not designed to be the "methodological police" although methodological concerns may be explored. Similarly, ethical review is concerned with risk, but it is not against research being conducted in dangerous or difficult places, nor does it prevent research from being conducted within difficult or hidden populations. Likewise, the process is not designed to prevent research engagements with difficult, sensitive, vulnerable, or hidden population.

The focus and purpose for ethical review is the protection of research subjects, the researcher and the ethics of the research practice. Most ethical reviews can be conducted in an expedient fashion if researchers design their methods, protocols, and engagements with the wellbeing of their subjects in mind. Even some cases where the connection to human subjects may not be obvious will require review. The outcome, application or connection of archival or historical research may have a direct bearing on communities or individuals so that the implications for harm must be weighed. This does not mean that all archival or historical projects need to be submitted for review, but researchers should think through the implications of their research and the potential applications of their findings.

The Process

As described in the UTREC remit, UTREC focuses on academic activity involving human subjects including those that may have potentially adverse consequences for human welfare and wellbeing. It also provides an overview of funders/sponsors (including firms and institutions) providing funding for research and assesses whether such funding should be accepted.

UTRECT focus lies on six issues:

- 1.) The welfare and protection of participants/subjects in research and teaching.
- 2.) The ethics of research practices and modes of activity involving human subjects.
- 3.) Morally inappropriate uses of the outcomes of such research.
- 4.) Issues of research sponsorship, especially where conflicts may arise or adverse consequences for the School or the University may ensue.
- 5.) The approval and review of individual activities of this kind.
- 6.) The approval and review of funders/sponsors (See below under Issues of Funders and Effects on the University and School).

To address the concerns listed at 1-5 UTREC has directed that all research involving human subjects be subjected to review. The School Ethics Committee (SEC) is the first and often only step in this process. Guided by the concerns and principles adopted by UTREC the various SECs around campus review the research and teaching that occurs under their auspices. In the case of the School of International Relations this would represent all of the research and teaching conducted within the school and the various centres associated with it. The SEC, comprising of three or four full time and permanent peers from the School, attends to the proposed research, providing constructive criticism and advice in the case of the need for revisions or resubmissions. Once the SEC has approved the research proposal, the applicant is free to conduct all of the research indicated and outlined in the proposal. That is, approval is given for a whole project, and does not require iterative approvals for discrete human engagements, *unless* there is a major revision or deviations from the design originally submitted. Likewise, iterative steps in a research agenda can be submitted in succession so that a researcher may begin one aspect of the overall project, and apply for approval of subsequent aspects at a later date. This allows researchers to begin work once they have a coherent design that meets the rigors of peer review. Minor revisions can be amended to the original SEC and /or UTREC approval. The SEC refers its decisions to UTREC for acknowledgement and monitoring.

In some particularly difficult, complex or novel cases, the SEC may choose to immediately send the application to UTREC for consideration, along with its own comments. Similarly in cases where the members of the SEC cannot agree the proposal will be referred to UTREC. It is the goal of the presently-constituted SEC to provide decisions on consensus. Should a process of internal revisions and resubmissions not produce a consensus of approval the application will be sent forward to UTREC. It is UTREC that has the final decision for the university. Its decisions cannot be appealed, as the Vice Principal for Research is on UTREC. However, applications not approved by UTREC can be revised and resubmitted, and advice is generally given by UTREC on facilitating this, as the aim to help research to occur.

In some cases additional ethics approval, exterior to the University, will be required. Generally these cases involve particularly vulnerable or sensitive populations. Research conducted within hospitals, prisons, or schools, for example, require additional ethical reviews from bodies such as the NHS, the Prison Service and Education authorities. In Scotland, research involving youth under 18 requires an additional police background check associated with Disclosure Scotland; work with other populations may similarly require Extended Disclosure Scotland approval. The URL address is listed below. Also many funders require submission to their own ethics review process, including ESRC. Even in cases where external or additional approval is required, the research must still obtain SEC

and UTREC approval as the University is ultimately and legally responsible for all research undertaken by its members. External approval obtained from approved collaborating research institutes may expedite the process, foregoing the need to submit a full application for review. Please refer to the list of recognized collaborating research institutes on the UTRECV website. Should the institution with which you are engaged in collaborative research not appear on the list, it may be added at the conclusion of the application process.

Protecting Research Subjects, Respondents and Participants

In many ways the entire ethical review process is about ensuring the protection and well being of those who make our research possible and meaningful. To ensure such protection five areas must be considered: honouring trust, anticipating harms, negotiating consent, ensuring the rights to confidentiality and anonymity, and weighing participant involvement in research and academic production.¹

- 1.) Honouring Trust: in all research, including when there may be a conflict of interest, social researchers must place the interests and rights of the respondents, informants and participants first. In those cases where it is not possible to fully guarantee the interests of participants or subjects, social researchers would be well advised to seriously consider whether they should pursue that piece or strand of research. Similarly, researchers should consider the impact of their work on that of their colleagues. Should the work of researchers potentially undermine the ability of colleagues to establish trust within similar communities or among populations, researchers would again be well advised to consider whether they should pursue that strand of research. Some extremely interesting strands of research could be so potentially damaging to respondents that they must not be pursued.
- 2.) Anticipating Harm: Social researchers must be sensitive to the possible consequences of their work and should work to identify and protect against potential harm. Obviously researchers should not place themselves in harm's way, but equally researchers should consider the impact of their work on research subjects, participants, and support staff, including interpreters, research assistants, drivers, and others involved in and assisting with data collection. In certain situations, where particularly religious or ethnic minorities or populations involved in socially deviant behaviours may be particularly vulnerable, it may be necessary to withhold data or to refrain from studying these groups altogether. In addition, in all cases where there is the potential to physical risk, this must be passed through the School and University's risk assessment procedures.
- 3.) Negotiating Informed Consent: Informed Consent is a fundamental principle. It is, as the Association of Social Anthropologists describes, a process not a one-time event. It is the spirit of transparency and open communication that guides the concept of consent: why is the research being conducted? What is the role of the informant or the respondent in the process of data collection? What is the purpose of the research project? These are questions that guide the conception of informed consent.

¹ Many of these points are well articulated in the document from the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK: "Ethical Guidelines for Good Research Practice", and in the UTREC Guidelines for Ethical Research.

Negotiating informed consent centres on clearly and accurately communicating the substance and aims of the research to a potential respondent, and gaining their agreement in turn. This can be obtained through the exchange of a written document (which is the preferred option), but not all social or cultural situations will allow or are best facilitated by acknowledgement of the respondents' willingness to participate through a written document. In some oral cultures written documents have no cache, and in some political or social situations a written document might be dangerous or inappropriate; in these cases oral consent should be obtained and the application form state how it will be obtained. The intent is not to obtain written consent as such, but to communicate the purpose of the research to the participants and to be assured that they understand what they are committing themselves to.

The respondent should be made aware of the scope and duration of the research project. At times it may be necessary that participants respond spontaneously and without preconceived or preconditioned ideas. Under these circumstances respondents should be de-briefed and the purpose and design of the research explained to them. Under some circumstances covert research is possible, but it requires a higher degree of scrutiny and a more precise articulation of the purpose and the gain for not engaging in disclosure. Treating respondents with respect will be the crucial guide here. This does not mean that respondents should be liked; quite to the contrary, researchers have a responsibility to engage all manner of populations, including those on the very fringes of societies or polities. However, even those with widely divergent viewpoints from the researchers' own or that of mainstream populations must be afforded respect and dignity, including those times when a researcher may be engaged in covert data collection.

Finally, when technical data-gathering devices are employed such as audio or video recording devices, the respondent or participant should be made aware of the capabilities of such devices and must be free to reject their use without prejudice.

- 4.) Rights to confidentiality and anonymity: anonymity is not merely having a name removed. Informants and respondents must have the option to engage researchers under terms of confidentiality and anonymity. This principle goes hand in glove with honouring trust. Social researchers appear in respondents' lives, but will eventually leave and return to their own institutional homes. Respondents, on the other hand, will live with the consequences of their having participated in research within their communities for some time to come. Therefore, social researchers must be sensitive to their own ability to create disruptions in respondents' lives. Holding respondents' trust is extremely important; to do this it is important to remember the many facets of identity, not merely recognition by name. Often when a respondent asks that his or her engagement remain anonymous the concern of recognition is not with regard to the world or community at large, but rather with regard to the most immediate and local communities. Eliminating a name is not enough; further care must be taken to protect identities and keep confidences.

The implications are not merely associated with recognition. Confidentiality and anonymity are kept to protect respondents' privacy, to ensure their social standing, and protect against the adverse effects of revealing information that relates illegal or socially deviant activities.

Keeping confidentiality and anonymity also requires protocols for data storage. This is particularly important while in the field. It is fine to inform respondents that their information will be held in confidence and its inclusion will be under terms of anonymity, but such assurances could be compromised easily if names, locations, and data are kept together in notes, or are kept in an insecure manner. This may be more pertinent to some research projects than others, but all social researchers should consider issues of data storage. In those cases of extremely sensitive materials, extra precautions should be taken, including the creating of coding protocols so that it is not possible to connect testimony or disclosures to particular individuals.

- 5.) Respondents' participation: researchers must be sensitive to disruptions. Finally, social researchers must be sensitive to their ability to disrupt or alter social networks and human relationships. Researchers are often in the field for a relatively short time, but participants must live with the consequences of involvement for much longer periods. The relationship between researcher and respondent is strongest when this is recognised and the researcher treats respondents with respect. Many communities feel that researchers descend upon them and take from them – take information, take time, take respect by making them feel they are objects and not subjects of research. Social researchers can help each other tremendously when they respect communities and respect the respondents' position within academic production: they are central. Often returning to a field site after research is concluded to share results is greatly appreciated, and normally an offer to share results of the research should be made.

Unethical outcomes of research application

UTREC has mandated that university research not be used to unethical ends. Thus research should not be used in a way that puts respondents at risk. Respondents cannot consent to place themselves in danger; thus, the application and use of the research should be fully disclosed. Social psychology research to improve the effectiveness of torture would be an example of unethical outcomes of social research.

Issues of Funders and Effects on the University and School

Ethical issues may arise with regard to funding sources of research. These concerns generally relate to the previous point of unethical applications. Most funders of academic research desire open and unfettered explorations. Ethical issues arise if funders aim to steer research to particular findings regardless of the research outcomes. Similarly, funding that is explicitly tied to particular findings is considered unethical. Funders should not place constraints on researchers, their methodologies or most importantly, their conclusions. Terms of relationship between researcher and funder may come under review.

Similarly, while university researchers have the academic freedom to pursue their own subject interests they have an obligation to not engage in research that may adversely affect others in the School and within the University, particularly regarding others' ability to conduct their own research. With the same concern for treating respondents with respect researchers should also consider the impact on other researchers within the school and the university. The independence of research must be clear and ensured at all times. Neither funders nor other researchers should encroach upon the independence of research or academic inquiry.

In all cases where funding or sponsorship is sought and obtained, the University's 'Fundors and Funding Approval Application' process must be followed. This is on the UTREC webpage, and flowchart details the process. Briefly, this form is submitted to the Head of School, who makes a recommendation to UTREC, which then sends its comments to the Head of School for approval or not. UTREC has given an undertaking to normally turn around an application, once it receives it, within two working days. A list of pre-approved funders can be found on the UTREC web page.

Expedited Review

The SEC can review much of the research conducted within the School of International Relations in an expedited fashion, normally within a two week period. Specifically applications for field research that centres on interviews with public officials speaking on the record will be reviewed in an expedient fashion. Participant observation based field research can similarly be considered similarly.

School Process

Research programmes which focus on human subject engagements should be submitted for ethical review. Open public record, named public official on-the-record interviews, and participant observation research programmes can be reviewed quickly. It is the aim to similarly consider more complicated programmes that may include issues of confidentiality or anonymity in a quick fashion. In all cases, should the SEC find problems with the application, comments and assistance will be given including some advice for adjusting the application.

Ethics review is peer review. This is not a policing or auditing function. It is intended to improve research implementation and ensure the protection of respondents. If peer review of articles and other publication is the end of the research process, think of ethical review as the peer review at the beginning of the research process.

The ESRC has identified six principles to govern ethic review that are echoed and amplified by the IR SEC. They are:

- 1.) Research should be designed and undertaken with integrity and quality. The peer review process ensures this.
- 2.) Research staff and subjects should be informed about the purpose, methods and intended possible uses of the research, what their participation entails, and what risks if any are involved.
- 3.) The confidentiality of information supplied by the subjects and the anonymity of respondents must be respected.
- 4.) Research subjects must participate in voluntary ways free of coercion.
- 5.) Harm to research participants should be avoided, including harm by neglect.
- 6.) The independence of research must be clear, and any conflicts of interest or partiality must be explicit.

The members of the SEC are available for consultation, and applications can be looked over before official submission.

Ethical Review Check List

Do I need to submit an application?

If your research involves human subject research, including interviews with public figures, you need to submit an application for review. If you are engaged in structured, semi-structured or survey research you must submit an application for review. Participant observation requires review as part of larger ethnographic consideration. Talking with members of the public requires an application, as the questions may be considered sensitive. No application is needed where only observation occurs, unless this could be considered intrusive. Where there are issues to do with data collection and storage, this research also requires a review.

What should I consider when apply for review?

The ethical review process is a peer review process of the implication of research. The protection of respondents is the most important consideration. Research should be designed with respect and concern for the wellbeing of respondent in mind.

What does the application process entail?

Applications should describe the implications of the research design for respondents. Issues of confidentiality, methods for ensuring anonymity, and provisions for securing and storing data are the overarching concerns of the review process. These concerns can be addressed in a straightforward and direct manner in Question number 31 of the UTREC Ethical Review Application.

When should I apply?

An application should be submitted before undertaking research. This is especially important for doctoral candidates; by strict interpretation of university policy data obtained without ethical approval is not to be included in dissertations for a degree. Review is for entire projects; the application should describe the implications, potential impacts, and processes for the larger project. Applications do not need to be submitted for each step of the research and these steps can be added by amendment to the original application, or, if a major change is contemplated, by the full process. Students, both undergraduates and postgraduates, must include the ethics review approval statement in their dissertation submissions.

For more information please consult the following web sites:

University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC)

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/>

UTREC Flowchart and Schedule of Procedures

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/media/Admin%20Flowchart.pdf>

UTREC Ethical Application Forms:

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/forms/>

UTREC Funders and Funding Approval Application

<http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/FundersFundingApplication/>

Disclosure Scotland:

<http://www.disclosurescotland.co.uk/NewApplicationGuidance.htm>

ESRC Research Ethics Frameworks:

http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf

Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth

<http://www.theasa.org/ethics/guidelines.htm>

American Anthropological Association Code of Ethics

<http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm>

American Political Science Association

<http://www.apsanet.org/imgtest/ethicsguideweb.pdf>

American Sociological Association

<http://www.asanet.org/cs/root/leftnav/ethics/ethics>

British Psychological Society (including conduct for internet research)

<http://www.bps.org.uk/the-society/code-of-conduct/>

British Sociological Association

<http://www.britisoc.co.uk/equality/Statement+Ethical+Practice.htm>