

Faculty of Social Sciences – Research Ethics Questionnaire

Department of Government

(Note: Further information is available via <https://sowi.univie.ac.at/en/research/research-ethics/>)

A) Research Design	Yes	No	Unsure	Does not apply
A.1. Does the study involve participants/populations who are unable to give informed consent and/or who are in a vulnerable/dependent position ? (e.g. minors, people with mental health struggles; asylum seekers; juvenile offenders; people in care facilities, including prisons)				
A.2. Will participants take part in the study without their consent or knowledge or will deception of any sort be involved? (e.g. covert observation of people in non-public places; consent in long-term projects not at one point in time but as an ongoing process; experiments without thorough debriefing)				
A.3. Is there ambiguity about whether the information/data you are collecting is considered to be public ? (e.g. Online data; Social Media Analysis)				
A.4. Does your research project pose specific ethical concerns not listed above? (e.g. studying religiously sensitive topics; end of life research; observations of sensitive medical treatment; studies involving coercion, social control or domination; studies involving potentially stigmatizing information)				
A.5. Are there potential conflicts of interest ? (e.g. dependent relationships between researchers and study participants; pressure from third-party funders to alter results)				
A.6. Will financial or other incentives (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time, e.g. survey incentives) be offered to participants that might have an impact on the outcome of the research, either in shaping who participates, or what participants do or say?				
B) Effects of Research	Yes	No	Unsure	Does not apply
B.1. Could the study induce psychological stress or anxiety , inflict humiliation , cause harm or other negative consequences to the research participants beyond the risks encountered in ordinary life?				
B.2. Are there any specific groups who are likely to be harmed by publication or distribution of the results of this project? Or is there any potential for misuse of the findings by third parties? (e.g. reputational harm for people, groups, or institutions; stigmatization; discrimination; this includes the consequences of statistical correlations)				
B.3. Is there a risk that the research topic might lead to the disclosure by participants of their involvement in illegal conduct or other activities that represent a threat to themselves or others? (e.g. sexual activity; drug use; criminal enterprises; abuse)				
B.4. Will there be a need for any independent legal assurance to be obtained to ensure that the research carried out is within the provision of the current law (to ensure that researchers and/or the University of Vienna are not in any legal jeopardy)?				
C) Use of Data	Yes	No	Unsure	Does not apply
C.1. Does your research fail to consider appropriate safeguards to ensure the protection of the privacy of participants (e.g. through anonymization or pseudonymization) in any published work (unless participants explicitly requested to be identified)?				
C.2. Is the transportation and storage of, or access to, your data managed in a manner that breaches the confidentiality agreement with your research participants? (e.g. transferring research data to personal devices that are less well protected)				
C.3. Does your data processing infringe upon the GDPR ? (not only the analysis of your research data, but also the storage of the personal data of research participants that will not be analysed in your research)				

D) Further Concerns	Yes	No	Unsure	Does not apply
D.1. Does your research pose any risks to your own physical or psychological wellbeing , or that of others working with you?				
D.2. Do you have any other ethical concerns arising from this study beyond those discussed above?				
D.3. Do you have the need for support and supervision to reflect on ethical challenges which come up during the research process beyond that currently provided to you?				

Guidelines for the Research Ethics Questionnaire

A) Research Design

A.1. Participants in a vulnerable/dependent position

Research with participants who are vulnerable and/or dependent on others (e.g. children, people with certain illnesses) requires particularly careful consideration. Because it is not always evident what constitutes vulnerability in a specific context, we, as researchers, have to reflect on what vulnerability and dependency mean in the specific context of our research project. Note that persons as such *are* not vulnerable but *are made* vulnerable by other persons, society etc.

Example: Adult illiteracy might not necessarily constitute vulnerability per se, depending on the research design. Equally, while refugees will generally require increased ethical sensitivity, a German-speaking refugee who entered Austria via plane, did not experience a traumatizing escape route, and who is securely employed in line with her qualifications can be considered less vulnerable than a refugee who speaks only Arabic, experienced a traumatizing escape route and is dependent on social benefits. However, also participants who may not be considered as conventionally vulnerable, such as students, might be in a dependent relationship with the researcher. If we consider participants to be vulnerable or dependent, we have to ensure appropriate mitigation strategies or, if not possible, change the research design of our project.

A.2. Informed Consent and Deception

Generally, we should adapt informed consent appropriately for the particularities of our research project. While the standard is a written form (available [here](#) in the “resources and support” section) filled in by someone capable of giving consent, alternative procedures may be more adequate in certain cases. Furthermore, in terms of informed consent, one size does not fit all. For certain research participants such as persons who suffered persecution in an authoritarian regime, we might prefer oral over written consent in order to mitigate mistrust and stressful situations. Moreover, obtaining informed consent may be an ongoing procedure (ongoing consent), in written and/or verbal form. This is for example relevant in long-term research projects and for persons diagnosed with dementia. Please also see example 1 on informed consent. Research that relies exclusively on publicly available information about persons of public interest (e.g. biographical information or parliamentary activity of political office-holders) generally does not require informed consent. Researchers with such research designs may therefore respond “No” to question A.2.

“Deception” means deliberately misleading a human participant about the purpose or nature of the research. It can take many forms, including withholding certain information from the participants before they take part in an experiment, and covert observation. Deception may, in some cases, be a legitimate and necessary feature of social science research. However, as researchers we must always carefully consider its use. If possible, we should inform participants about the purpose of the research immediately after its completion. The use of deception always requires prior and specific approval. Please also see example 2 on deception.

Example 1: Regarding informed consent procedures for research involving minors, we have to consider differences in the respective national legislation and the sensitivity of the research topic. For example, in Austria, people aged 16 or 17 might be considered “competent youths” who fully understand the project and its implications for them. The law considers them mature minors with certain legal capacities. We, as researchers, have to carefully consider if participation requires informed consent from parents or legal guardians as well. Safeguarding consent procedures entails for us researchers to take time to explain what the research entails, why it is being carried out, how this involves participants, and the fact that they can end their participation at any time, or simply not take part in the research if they wish.

Example 2: Experiments often involve deception in the form of manipulating participants into something that is not the case such as conveying another research aim than intended (e.g. telling participants that you are interested in your experiment in measuring their reaction time, while you actually want to study how they perform under time pressure). This may be justified for research purposes. We should however apply appropriate mitigation strategies such as thorough debriefing and the possibility to withdraw consent afterwards.

A.3. Public information/data

It may not always be easy to decide whether or not data is public and can be used for research purposes. Uncertainties may, for instance, arise when planning to study social media platforms, forums and chatrooms in which people share personal information. As researchers, we must be particularly careful about whether we are legally and ethically permitted to use the information we gather. With regard to the question of whether social media is considered public or non-public, the legal situation may differ from the views of users on social media platforms (find further information about that in the website’s “Resources and Support” section).

Example: Online forums might seem to be public spheres because they are easily accessible by creating an anonymous account. Still, on password-protected pages, it is vital that we ensure that the providers and users of an online forum are aware of our research activities. Sensitive personal topics, such as gender-based violence, might be discussed in what feels to be protected spaces, and we must not merely collect the conversations for our research without getting approval from the community.

A.4. Specific ethical concerns

We should reflect upon specific ethical concerns arising from our study. Please note that we should design research and conduct it in a way that respects the rights, interests, values, dignity and (whenever possible) autonomy of our research participants. This includes individual persons, groups and communities.

Example: Observations of sensitive medical treatment might require particular safeguards, such as the involvement of family members in the informed consent process, and sufficient time between a first

meeting in which we introduce ourselves and our project, and the first observational session. Another example of an ethically challenging situation is an employer with a professional interest in a study in his factory who asks low wage manual workers to participate in a study on this topic. In light of the dependency of the employees on their employer, possible strategies to mitigate vulnerability might be pseudonymous participation in the study so that it is only apparent to us as researcher who participates in the study.

A.5. Conflicts of interest

Conflicts of interest may arise when our professional actions may be influenced by considerations of personal gain beyond a successful research project. Gain may be financial as well as non-monetary, such as political self-advancement or claims supporting a personal problem perception. Potential conflicts of interest must be disclosed to research participants and handled transparently throughout the process of seeking ethics approval and the entire course of the research project. In co-operations with industry partners, we must not change our research results or questions to make them more appealing to those partners. The same also holds true for scientific policy consulting, for which the University of Vienna issued guidelines [here](#). Conflicts of interest may also arise through perceived pressure to participate due to a dependent relationship with other members of our research team or the research organisation/s.

A.6. Financial incentives

Financial compensation for the time and effort that participants contribute to research is common practice. However, it is important that the compensation offered, if at all, is proportional to the time and effort spent, and not an inducement that could influence the research outcomes. Monetary compensation could be considered inappropriate if the amount of money was directly linked to what participants say or how they behave in a study, or if it would substantially influence who can take part in a study.

Example: It would be problematic to pay only participants who report in their interviews about experiences that support the researcher's hypothesis. It is also problematic to pay the participants of the same study different amounts of money, depending on your assessment of how much their time is worth. Low wage earners might for example not be able to take part in a study if the time compensation is below a certain amount.

B) Effects of Research

B.1. Stress and negative consequences

It is our responsibility to ensure that our research does as little harm as possible to our participants. Causing participants stress or unease may however be acceptable if the expected outcome of the study presents a significant scientific and societal benefit. We must reflect carefully on whether or not the research should go ahead despite the risks and how those adverse effects can be mitigated (see example 1). The probability that such negative consequences might occur depends on the context and the participants and their life situations (see example 2). Moreover, research projects might cause unanticipated distress. To minimise this risk, the possibility of participants to withdraw from the study must at all times remain possible and participants must be informed of this (see example 3).

Example 1: After taking part in a study, participants might face consequences or reprisals from whistleblowing/speaking up, or may be left with a negative self-image. Furthermore, discussing past traumatic events might induce flashbacks in the participants. In this instance, we could support them by offering follow-up meetings after the interviews or the indication of contact details for mental health assistance.

Example 2: The discussion of sensitive topics such as abuse, terrorism, and mental health struggles with people affected by these issues could very likely cause distress and requires careful thought on how to approach such delicate topics. However, discussing such topics with professionals whose work is related to those areas may not constitute a high risk.

Example 3: In a long-term study, participants might feel comfortable during several meetings in the course of the research project. However, at some point they might feel acute psychological stress. For example, an asylum seeker who is confronted with a negative asylum decision might no longer be comfortable to talk about his life situation with a researcher. In this case, mitigation strategies by us as researchers can include making contact with the psychological services, refugee accommodation facilities, or also encouraging participants to withdraw from the study.

B.2. Dissemination of Results

Research results may affect our research participants (as individual persons, or for groups, and communities), including violating their rights, interests, values, dignity and autonomy. In such a case, we must weigh the effects of the publication and distribution of the findings against the harms inflicted. This entails the selection of an appropriate platform for the results. It also requires us to reflect upon how we can avoid negative consequences and mitigate them by sufficient contextualization and explanation of the findings. Furthermore, some research might be considered ethically not permissible per se due to adverse consequences to its participants.

Example: The stigmatization of a religious group due to statistical correlations or historical practices will require thorough contextualisation of the findings. Research which attributes character traits to biological characteristics might be unethical per se as it risks essentialisation and in the most negative examples from history even justify eugenic programmes.

B.3. Disclosure of illegal activities

Research may involve an increased or even significant likelihood that participants will disclose involvement in illegal or other activities that represent a threat to themselves or others. Such disclosure might prompt us, or a member of our team, to consider the need to breach confidentiality agreements. Although information gathered from research with human participants should generally remain confidential, there are situations in which a third party (such as an appropriate/relevant authority or organization) might need to be informed. In some instances, the breach of confidentiality might even be demanded by law (for example child abuse). In Austria, there is no general obligation to inform the police about illegal activities of which you have become aware. However, competent authorities, such as courts, can serve researchers with subpoenas and compel them to provide information gathered during their research if said information is needed in the course of a (criminal) investigation. If researchers decide not to provide the information demanded, they might face legal consequences. Finding oneself in this situation can be counteracted by storing only the most necessary data and information from the research participants and by rapidly anonymizing it. Researchers cannot be obliged to disclose information that they do not possess.

B.4. Legal Liability

Research might result in legal action being taken against us researcher(s) or the University of Vienna. We have to make sure to consider all possible actions concerning potential legal consequences. This entails the Austrian law, European Union legislation, and foreign legal frameworks if the research is conducted abroad or bears other legally actionable impacts in foreign countries. Identifying the relevant law, and provisions therein can be a difficult, yet necessary task. If your research requires you to move in a jurisdiction unknown to you, it is advised to contact the professional association of your field in the respective country.

C) Use of Data

C.1. Anonymity or Pseudonymity

We must distinguish between anonymisation and pseudonymisation: **Anonymisation** means to render it irreversibly impossible to associate data with a person. For this reason, anonymised data are outside the remit of data protection laws. **Pseudonymisation** means that it is possible, with the help of additional information (typically an identification key) to associate personal data with a person. Pseudonymised data are within the remit of data protection laws. (see Art 4(5) General Data Protection Regulation).

Examples: While protecting the identity of our research participants, it is also essential to reflect on whether a direct quote in a publication might allow a contextual identification of the person. For instance, the quote from the only female co-worker in a company or the only research group studying a certain subject in Austria is easily identifiable without knowing the identification key. Some research topics may require our increased sensitivity about the potential to identify participants as members of a particular community. This holds true, for instance, for working with individuals from politically pursued groups who fear reprisal from the respective regime.

C.2. Data Management

It is our duty as researchers to manage the collected data in a way that enables the confidentiality we assured to the research participants. Moreover, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) legally requires researchers to protect their participants' personal data. Thus, special care is required for personal data of our research participants, which allows direct or indirect identification of a person or a group, such as the name, email, pictures, voice-recordings, social media usernames, etc. We must ensure that the transfer, storing and destruction of data is handled in a way that safeguards our participants' privacy. This includes making sure the data are stored in protected spaces, that no third-parties, other than those transparently communicated to participants, have access to such data and that data is destroyed adequately when it is no longer needed by the project. That applies to electronic handling of data (e.g. password protection of files and USB-Sticks, using protected devices for recording and processing data, using computer programs that specifically conform to GDPR) as well as physical handling of data (e.g. not leaving documents with personal information in the printer visible for others, shredding paper containing personal information). The University of Vienna provides information about data management as well as services for storing your data appropriately [here](#).

Example: Considerate data management also requires avoiding recording interviews on inappropriate devices such as personal smartphones, sharing raw data with people other than the participants were informed about, storing data on services such as Dropbox or Google Drive, as well as sending transcripts via private mail accounts.

C.3. GDPR compliance

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) is a binding EU law on the protection of personal data. As a general rule, it states that personal data (i.e. data that relates to an identified or identifiable natural person) must not be processed, except when such processing is authorised by law. In the absence of legal authorisation for the use of personal data, we need to obtain the consent of our research participants (or whose personal data we are using). In addition to the GDPR requirements already stated in C.2. about thorough data management that protects personal data, complying with the GDPR also requires us researchers to inform our participants about what data we collect about them, why we need it for research purposes, how (long) we store it; contact details about the researcher who is responsible for data processing, and information about the persons (or categories of persons) to whom we might disclose the data. If data recipients are situated outside the European Economic Area we must communicate to our participants which safeguards will apply for the transfer and we must ensure that the non-European partners adhere to the GDPR. Further information regarding GDPR can be found [here](#), and direct contact with the [officer for data protection](#) of the University of Vienna can be made. For an assessment of whether your research might violate the GDPR, you can start by reading pages 10 - 21 of this document (https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/fp7/89888/ethics-for-researchers_en.pdf).

D) Further Concerns

D.1. Physical or Psychological Wellbeing

When designing a research project, it is important to reflect upon potential risks of physical or psychological harm for ourselves and others working with us. This includes members of our research team as well as people involved in supporting positions, such as transcribing and coding data. We should take necessary precautions and build appropriate support mechanisms to ensure such individuals' wellbeing. Peer or supervision meetings can, for instance, help in coping with emotionally challenging situations and prevent physical harm.

Examples: We must inform the people working with us about potentially disturbing content of our data (e.g. discussions on the experience of violence) before they start working and make sure they can stop working if they are uncomfortable with it. When studying, for instance, criminal activities or working with persons with mental health problems in the form of aggression issues, we need to put precautions for avoiding harm in place.

D.2. Other ethical concerns

There might be elements within and beyond the research design, the effects of the research and the use of data which are not covered by this standardised ethics screening. It is our obligation as researchers to

reflect upon potential blind-spots which incur in our project. This question was included in this questionnaire to encourage the possibility to get in touch with your supervisor/other researchers to collectively reflect on other ethical concerns you might have.

D.3. Support and supervision for reflection

Ethical reflection is an ongoing endeavour also after ethical approval has been given at the beginning of a project. We as researchers should have the possibility to discuss upcoming ethical challenges in adequate spaces such as analysis groups, research ethics seminars, etc. In case of junior researchers, supervisors are important contact persons to discuss ethical challenges; some research projects may however require additional contact persons as supervisors and project coordinators may have a scientific self-interest in the project which contradicts ethical concerns of the researcher.