

Social Policy Association Guidelines on Research Ethics

Introduction

The purpose of these Guidelines on Research Ethics is to provide a framework to help members of the Social Policy Association (SPA) identify and address the different kinds of ethical issues which may arise in the conduct of social policy research. They do not replace the need to engage in dialogue, training and debate around research ethics; nor the need to seek formal approval from an appropriate Research Ethics Committee (for example NHS or University-based) where necessary. The Guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive. Rather they aim to raise awareness among SPA members of their responsibilities to different constituencies when conducting research; to offer recommendations to members on how to address these; and to encourage and promote continuing discussion of how ethical dilemmas in research can most satisfactorily be resolved. The process of ethical review should be one which supports rather than hinders research. These Guidelines build on the work carried out by other professional associations in the UK and in the US¹ to develop research ethics guidelines for their members, particularly the work of the Social Research Association. The SPA Guidelines add to this work by identifying issues that are of particular relevance to social policy researchers because of the nature of the fields in which they work and the methods they use.

Social policy research is concerned broadly with understanding the distribution and organisation of welfare and well-being within societies. Its focus is on the ways in which different societies understand and meet the needs of their populations. Social policy is an interdisciplinary and applied field which is concerned with analysing the distribution and delivery of resources in response to social need. The subject draws on ideas and methods from sociology, political science and economics, while also using insights from a range of other subjects including social anthropology, human geography, social psychology and social work. As a field in its own right, social policy studies the ways in which societies provide for the social and economic needs of their members through structures and systems of distribution, redistribution, regulation, provision and empowerment. The issues with which social policy is concerned means that social policy research has four features, which differentiate it to some extent from other social science disciplines²:

- it tends to address both academic and policy/practice questions;
- it engages with users of welfare services;

¹ The Social Research Association, the British Sociological Association, the British Society of Criminology and the American Sociological Association. Full references and links to their respective ethical guidance can be found in the bibliography at the end of this document.

² These features were identified by Professor Jan Pahl in her presentation to the SPA seminar on research ethics held as part of the process of developing these Guidelines.

- it works with a range of disciplines and research methodologies;
- it has a responsibility to disseminate results to a range of audiences, both academic and policy/practice.

These Guidelines follow the Social Research Association's ethical guidelines in identifying four distinct but overlapping constituencies towards whom social policy researchers have ethical responsibilities:

- society in general;
- research participants;
- research sponsors and funders;
- colleagues and the profession.

A. Obligations to society

Social policy researchers have a general responsibility to undertake research that will contribute to the public good and to ensure that their research is appropriately applied and disseminated.

A1. Standing of the discipline. Social policy research makes a valuable contribution to developing understanding of human needs and of the adequacy of the social institutions that have been developed to respond to these. Researchers have a duty to maintain the good standing of the discipline through the ways in which they conduct research and thereby the way in which social policy research is regarded.

A2. Compliance with the law. Social policy researchers have a duty to inform themselves about legal provisions relevant to the issues which they are researching and to the data that they hold (for example, data protection legislation). They should not knowingly break the law at any stage in the conduct of their research.

A3. Conflicts of interest. Social policy research is often concerned with conflicting interests (e.g. between individuals and social institutions, or between different social groups). Researchers should be aware of any such conflicts of interest engaged with through their research. They should endeavour to ensure that their research findings are not misrepresented. In published work they should state who funded the research.

A4. Reflexivity. Social policy research is centrally concerned with social values. While it is inevitable that the choice of research topics and methods will be influenced by individuals' values and beliefs, researchers should reflect critically on the ways in which their values and beliefs influence their research approach and the conduct, analysis and reporting of research. They should aim to be as transparent as possible in describing the methods used in their research and in the analysis and production of findings so as to lay the research process open for scrutiny and review. They

should be explicit about the limitations of research findings that have implications for public policy.

B. Obligations to Research Participants

There is a general duty on all researchers to ensure that individuals participate in research on the basis of freely given consent and that their participation does not expose them to avoidable harm. If participation in research does expose participants to the possibility of harm, it is important that they understand the nature of that harm when giving their consent. Social policy research often focuses on individuals and social groups who are vulnerable, disadvantaged and relatively powerless and it is therefore important to pay particular attention to research participants' rights in the design, conduct and dissemination of research. Social policy research also often involves individuals and social groups who are relatively powerful (for example policy makers and practitioners) who might nonetheless be exposed to harm through their participation in research. It is important to ensure wherever possible that all participants in social policy research, regardless of their status, understand and consent to the consequences of taking part in the research. Researchers should be aware at all times that a commitment to the advancement of knowledge does not entitle them to over-ride the rights of others.

B1. Protection of research participants from harm. Researchers have a responsibility to take all steps possible to ensure that the social, psychological or physical well-being of research participants is not adversely affected by participation in their research study.

B2. Protection of research participants' rights. Researchers have a duty to protect the rights, interests, sensitivities and privacy of research participants. All reasonable steps should be taken to maintain confidentiality about the identity of research participants.

B3. Vulnerable groups. Researchers have a duty to give particular consideration to the possible harm that may arise from participation in a research study for those who are vulnerable by virtue of incapacity, social status or powerlessness.

B4. Informed consent. Research participation should wherever possible be based on individuals' freely given informed consent and participation should not expose them to avoidable harm. Potential participants should be given information on what the research is about in terms that are meaningful to them. Where participation in research does expose participants to the possibility of harm, it is important that they understand the nature of that harm when giving consent. They should be told what their participation in the research involves, who is funding the research and the likely use that will be made of the research findings when they are initially approached to

take part in a research study. They should be given clear information and assurances about how data will be stored, who will have access to it and on what terms, and about the confidentiality of information provided by participants in the course of the research.

Researchers should anticipate the potential future use by others of suitably anonymised research data for secondary analysis and should seek consent from research participants for the data to be archived for this purpose.

Consent to participate in a research study should be regarded as an on-going process and it should be made clear to participants that they are free to withdraw from the study or withhold information at any point. Participants should be given the opportunity to ask for further information about the study at any time.

Careful consideration should be given to the appropriate procedures for obtaining informed consent from people for whom it may be difficult to ascertain that information on the study in question has been appropriately presented and understood, for example, those with sensory or communicative impairments or learning disabilities, people with mental disabilities or those who are intoxicated.

Where research involves children, consent should be obtained from the child as well as from an adult with caring responsibility for the child.

Where research is carried out using a method which makes obtaining informed consent difficult – for example, covert research or secondary data analysis – researchers should take particular care to ensure the prevention of harm to participants and the protection of their anonymity.

B5. Confidentiality. Information provided to a researcher in the context of a research study should be treated as confidential. Care should be taken at all stages of the research process not to compromise that confidentiality. Careful consideration should be given to how to maintain confidentiality and anonymity for research participants whose social position may make their identity hard to disguise.

It should be made clear to research participants that researchers' commitment to confidentiality may be over-riden under certain circumstances, for example, where a researcher has a legal or moral duty to report incidents of harm. Under these circumstances, researchers have a duty to pass relevant information to child protection or adult protection services. Where such a situation arises researchers should give careful thought to how to manage the situation, and should consider involving an advisory panel or colleague with relevant experience (see B12 below).

B6. Provision of information about support services. Participation in research may be disturbing or cause distress to participants. Researchers should try to

anticipate this and consider whether it is appropriate, under some circumstances, to offer information about relevant support services.

B7. Sharing research findings with participants. Researchers should ensure the inclusion of research participants in the dissemination of research findings, through material specifically produced for them. Consideration should be given to the most appropriate media through which to do this.

B8. Storage of data. All research data should be stored in a secure and protected manner, which may include encryption of data. This relates to electronic data (for example data sets, SPSS files, transcripts, etc) as well as data which are stored in paper format. Storage must comply with the requirements of Data Protection legislation and best practice on confidentiality.

B9. Data archiving. Data should be archived for a period of no less than seven years (or other period as specified by the research funder) after completion of a research project to protect and defend intellectual property rights; to enable researchers to return to their original data for the purpose of further writing and publications; to protect researchers from plagiarism; to enable further (secondary) analysis of data; to allow scrutiny of data if required, and so on. Research participants should be informed that data will be archived in this way for primary research purposes.

Researchers should consider the desirability of making their research data available to the wider research community for long-term use and sharing. Where this is anticipated, the research consent procedure should include research participants' consent for the data to be deposited in a publicly accessible archive. Researchers should ensure such data are archived in such a way as to protect the anonymity of participants and comply with all legal requirements.

B10. Internet research. The ethical issues raised by research conducted over the internet are no different in principle from those that arise in research using other means of investigation. However there are particular practical difficulties that arise in relation to requirements of informed consent; confidentiality; and security of data transmission. Particular care is required when engaging with children.

B11. User involvement. Social policy research has a particular interest in the experience and perspective of users of welfare services and a duty to incorporate users' perspectives into research studies involving and affecting them. Careful consideration should be given to ways of involving service users in the design, conduct and interpretation of such studies. The duty to incorporate users' perspectives does not override the ultimate responsibility of the researcher for the design and conduct of the research.

B12. Advisory panel for complex ethical issues. Where complex ethical issues arise in the course of a research study (for example, whether to disclose possible harm of a research subject to a third party) researchers should consider setting up an advisory panel of experienced social researchers with whom the issues can be discussed and who can assist with making difficult decisions.

C. Obligations to Research Sponsors/Funders

Social policy researchers have a responsibility to ensure that research sponsors or funders understand and appreciate the obligations that they have to society at large, to research participants and to professional colleagues and to the discipline. Researchers also have responsibility to maintain good relations with sponsors/funders in the interests of ensuring the continuing provision of research funding.

C1. Relationships with funders. Researchers should endeavour to maintain good relationships with funding and professional agencies to achieve the aim of advancing knowledge and avoid bringing the social policy community into disrepute. Researchers should avoid damaging confrontations with funding agencies which might reduce research possibilities for others.

C2. Clarity about responsibilities. Researchers should clarify in advance the sponsor's and the researchers' respective obligations and responsibilities and wherever possible these should be set out in a written agreement. They should avoid contractual conditions which limit academic integrity or freedom. Researchers should make every effort to complete projects to the timescale of the contractual agreement.

C3. Modification of research design. Researchers should inform and, where appropriate, consult with the sponsor/funder about any departure from agreed terms of reference.

C4. Appropriate timescale and funding. Researchers should avoid contracts which emphasise speed and economy at expense of good quality research.

C5. Freedom to publish. Researchers should avoid restrictions on their freedom to disseminate findings to a range of audiences: academics, policy makers, practitioners, users and politicians. Freedom to publish may be a particular issue in relation to research carried out for government departments.

D. Obligations to the Subject and to Colleagues

Social policy researchers have important ethical responsibilities to social policy as a field of study and to colleagues with whom they work. They have a responsibility to promote intellectual and professional freedom and to disseminate knowledge. The work that they do should contribute to public trust in the subject and ethical conduct in relation to research has an important role to play in this. At a time when short-term contract research constitutes a significant proportion of the research work undertaken in social policy, social policy researchers in secure employment have important responsibilities to promote the interests of colleagues who are in a less secure position. Respect for others is essential, even where there are disagreements over theory, method or personal approach to professional activities.

Responsibilities to the subject

D1. Training. Researchers have a duty to undertake training to ensure that they are competent in the methods which they employ and to extend their knowledge and skills. Thinking about ethical issues should be built into research training and research management. Researchers have a responsibility to undertake research competently; to reflect continually on research methods and practice; and to contribute to their advancement in the social policy community. They should not make claims to expertise which they do not have.

D2. Misrepresentation of findings. Where their research findings are misrepresented by others, researchers have a responsibility to try to correct such misrepresentations.

D3. Reliability of sources. Researchers have a responsibility to check the reliability of the sources of information that they use.

D4. Openness. Researchers should ensure that methods they employ and their research findings are open for discussion and peer review.

D5. Working environment. Researchers should promote a working environment and professional relationships that are conducive to openness, honesty and mutual trust in order to promote good research practice.

Responsibilities to colleagues

D6. Authorship. Researchers should ensure that decisions about authorship are made in a fair and transparent way, with reference to appropriate disciplinary conventions, and, where appropriate, acknowledge the other contributors to the generation and production of the research, for example, gatekeepers or research assistants.

D7. Professional development of early career staff. Researchers should actively promote the professional development of early career research staff, for example through the provision of training; by ensuring early career staff have appropriate opportunities to publish and make conference presentations; and by supporting them in making research grant applications in their own right.

D8. Attribution of ideas/materials. Researchers should never claim the work of others as their own. All use of the ideas or materials of others should be fully attributed, whatever their status and regardless of the status of the ideas or materials (e.g. even if these are in draft form).

D9. Equal opportunities. Researchers should promote equal opportunities and actively seek to avoid discriminatory behaviour.

Appendix: Useful sources and other information on ethical issues

Social Research Association (SRA) (2003) *Ethical Guidelines*. London: SRA.
(www.the-sra.org.uk/documents/pdfs/ethics03.pdf)

British Sociological Association (BSA) (2002) *Statement of Ethical Practice*. Durham : BSA (www.britisoc.co.uk/user_doc/Statement%20of%20Ethical%20Practice.pdf)

British Society of Criminology (BSC) (2006) *Code of Ethics for Researchers in the Field of Criminology*. (<http://www.britisoccrim.org/ethical.htm>)

American Sociological Association (ASA) (1999) *Code of Ethics* Washington: ASA.
(<http://www.asanet.org/galleries/default-file/Code%20of%20Ethics.pdf>)

ESRC (2007) *Research Ethics Framework*. Downloadable from:
(http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Fram_e_tcm6-11291.pdf)

Medical Research Council (MRC) (2000, updated 2005) *Good Research Practice*. London: MRC
(<http://www.mrc.ac.uk/Utilities/Documentrecord/index.htm?d=MRC002415>)