

Guidelines for Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics

A. Scope

Survey and behavioural research covers surveys as well as observation of human behaviour. The latter refers to first hand public/naturalistic observations on human subjects, and the observations of human subjects in experiments. Survey, defined broadly, covers the following areas:

- questionnaire surveys, including telephone surveys (regardless of the sample size).
- either group or individual interviews.
- in-depth case study of the target participant(s).
- observation of human behavior by whatever non-clinical means.

According to the *University's Policy on Research, Consultancies and Intellectual Property*, all research proposals, contracts for consultancies and services or applications for outside practice involving surveys would need to obtain ethics approval from the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* (formerly Survey Ethics Committee) of the University. Survey and behavioural research ethics in research activities involves both ethical and legal issues. It is not only an expression of the ethical concern for the rights of the participants of the research, but also in compliance with local legal codes, such as the Personal Data and Privacy Ordinance.

B. Who Should Apply For Review

All members of the university community (teaching and research staff, postgraduate and undergraduate students) are expected to conduct their survey research studies in a legal and ethical manner. Researchers whose research strategies and plans are within the domain of survey and behavioural research (please refer to definition in Section A above) should obtain approval from the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* BEFORE they conduct their research studies.

The procedures to apply for ethics approval from the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* are explained below (Section F of the Guidelines).

Researchers should examine the nature of their research studies to determine if they need to obtain approval from other research ethics committee within CUHK (e.g., Human/Clinical Research Ethics Committee, Animal Research Ethics Committee).

C. Types of Review

The *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* differentiates between two types of review: An expedited review and a full review. Expedited reviews

require the completion of a *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Form (Form)* and submission of a copy of the survey instruments to be used or a detailed description of these instruments. Researchers are not required to submit a full proposal of their research projects. If a research study does not qualify for an expedited review process, then a full review by the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* has to be conducted. Researchers have to submit a full research proposal of their research studies along with the Form to the Committee so that the research procedures and rationales could be closely examined. If necessary, the Committee may request additional materials from researchers to justify their research studies.

C1. An Expedited Review

In general, expedited reviews are granted if none of the following is involved in a research project:

- a. Participants are unable to give informed consent, (e.g. children, mentally handicapped individuals). (Sections D1 and D3 of this *Guidelines*).
- b. Excessive or inappropriate inducements, financial or otherwise, are provided to influence subjects to participate. (Section D2 of this *Guidelines*).
- c. Deception of participants is involved. (Section D4 of this *Guidelines*).
- d. The study involves studying sensitive aspects of the participant's own behaviour such as illegal conduct, drug or alcohol use, and sexual conduct.
- e. Disclosure of the observations on the participants will likely place the participant at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the participant's financial standing, employability, or personal reputation.
- f. The study can induce undue psychological stress to participants.
- g. Pain or discomfort that is higher than a reasonable level is likely to result from participating in the research study.
- h. Prolonged and repetitive testing is involved.

For research studies involving public/naturalistic observations, the following additional conditions have to be fulfilled to qualify these studies for an expedited review:

- i. In the researcher's private data as well as in any published material, observations are recorded in such a manner that the identities of participants cannot be identified; or
- ii. The observations, even if disclosed outside the research, could not reasonably place the participants at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the participant's financial standing, employability, mental well-being, or personal reputation.

For observations with public officials, an expedited review is granted to all research involving survey, interview, or public observations of respondents who are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office.

For research studies using secondary data analyses, an expedited review is granted to research studies involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records

(a) if these sources are publicly available, or

(b) if the participants cannot be identified in any published material and reasonable precaution is taken to preserve the confidentiality of the identity of individuals in the research data.

C2. A Full Review

Projects that fail to meet the requirements for an expedited review must go through a full review. In those cases, a researcher has to submit a completed Form and a full research proposal.

D. Ethical Guidelines Concerning the Use of Human Research Participants

D1. Informed Consent

The researcher must obtain either verbal or written consent of the data subject(s) who participate(s) in the surveys according to the following guidelines:

- Voluntary informed consent, in writing, should normally be obtained from any participant who is able to give such consent. However, for anonymous surveys, this requirement is optional but strongly recommended.
- Research participants should be informed that they have the right to terminate the study at any time.
- Research procedures should be explained to the research participants before the administration of data collection.
- For studies that involve potential risk to the participants, an information sheet that is easily comprehensible by the potential research participants should be provided.
- The information sheet should set out the purposes of the investigation, the procedures, the risks (including psychological distress), the benefits to the individual or to others, a statement that participants are free to decline to participate, and significant factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate, including limitations in ensuring confidentiality.
- In situations when a third party (e.g. spouses or other health care professionals who are directly involved in the treatment and care of the potential subjects) is involved or affected by the research, consent should also be obtained from them.
- In the case of normal secondary school children, i.e., Form 1 and above, if the survey meets requirements of section C1 for an expedited review AND is anonymous, school consent is deemed sufficient, and parental consent is strongly recommended but optional. However, students should be clearly informed that their participation in the study is voluntary.

- Consent of a parent or a legal guardian is needed for ALL other surveys (anonymous or non-anonymous) involving children, including primary school children.

D2. Undue Influence and Inducement to Participate

- Research participants should be free from coercion of any kind and should not be pressured to participate in any research study.
- Inducements, such as unreasonable services or financial payments, are not ethically permitted.
- Reimbursement of participants' expenses, e.g., for journeys, is not considered payment in the sense of reward, and so it is permissible.
- Any payment to research participants should be indicated on the Survey Ethics Form for consideration by the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee*.

D3. Vulnerable Research Participants Who Need Special Consideration

- Vulnerable research participants are those who are either unable to give informed consent, or are captive participants who are less able to protect themselves.
- Children should not be asked to serve as research subjects if the required data could be obtained from adults. Please observe requirements for obtaining informed consent from children (section D1 of this *Guideline*).
- For research studies involving individuals who are not capable of giving informed consent because of their mental status (e.g., mental patients or individuals with cognitive disabilities), informed consent may have to come from both the participant, and his/her legal guardian, an immediate relative, and/or an attending physician where appropriate. The same principle applies to elderly or acutely ill individuals who might not be capable of making decisions regarding research participation.
- The quality of informed consent of potential participants who are in a potentially dependent or dual relationships with the researcher (e.g., students, employees and patients) requires careful consideration, as willingness might be unduly influenced by power differences, or by the expectations of advantageous benefits or penalties. Such arrangements should be avoided if research data could be collected from other sources.

D4. Research involving Deception of Subjects

- The use of one-way mirrors must be clearly justified.
- In some exceptional cases, the researcher might give participants somewhat misleading information about the nature of the research. Research studies of this nature have to be approved by the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* before administration. The researcher must explain in detail why the research could not practicably be carried out without the

deception, and why the deception will not adversely affect the well being of the participants in a significant way. All deception must be explained to participants as early as feasible, preferably at the conclusion of their participation, but no later than at the conclusion of the research.

E. Guidelines on Ensuring Confidentiality of Research and Personal Data

- Surveys are either anonymous or non-anonymous, and effort must be made to protect the confidentiality of research data for both types of surveys:
- Whatever information is obtained in research should under no circumstances be publicly disclosed in a fashion that would identify any specific person or organization (except with the participants' written consent or if subpoenaed by a court).
- Except in anonymous surveys or public/naturalistic observations, the researcher should outline to prospective research participants the purpose of the collection of the personal data and what methods the researcher would adopt to ensure confidentiality.
- For projects in which private information about participants to be collected is not considered sensitive, participants should be informed that the researcher will take precautions to preserve the confidentiality of the research data and that all reports of the research will be devoid of identifiers.
- When the researcher collects sensitive personal information about participants, the researcher should specify the precautions relating to the storage, use, and disposition of the materials. For example, data will be kept in locked files and only the researcher(s) will have access to them; data subjects will be identified by a code and therefore their personal identities will not be disclosed easily.
- In most cases, the researcher should give participants full information on the proposed management, use, and disposition of photographs and audio or video recordings.

F. Procedures to Obtain Survey Research Ethics Approval

The researcher should fill out the Form and seek endorsement from the Department Chairperson or Unit Head. The endorsed Form, together with other relevant documents (e.g., consent form, a copy of the research questionnaire, and research proposal), should be sent to the appropriate Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee or Sub-committee.

For research projects requesting an expedited review, the researcher should provide clear and sufficient information in the Form so that the committee could make a judgment on whether the project in question qualified for an expedited review. The researcher should also submit a copy of the research questionnaire or instrument to be used, and if unavailable, a detailed description of these instruments. Please note that the Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee is ultimately responsible for determining if a research study qualifies for an expedited review (i.e., exempted from a full review).

For projects that require a full review, the researcher should submit the research proposal, together with a completed Form to the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee*. The application should address, where appropriate, issues of informed consent (vulnerable subjects, undue inducement to participate, or deception of subjects), precautions in guarding confidentiality of sensitive data, and risks to subjects (psychological stress, significant discomfort, or damages in the event of disclosure of research data). The risks involved should be balanced against the potential benefits of the proposed research.

F1. Research Studies Conducted by University Staff Members

University staff members are responsible to seek approval from an appropriate research ethics committee before they engage in the data collection process. If the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* is determined to be the appropriate channel, the staff member should obtain the Form from the secretary of the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* (please refer to Section H of this *Guidelines* for address), or download the Form from the website of the Committee.

a. For research studies conducted by members of the Faculties of Arts, Business Administration, Social Science, Medicine, and Education, researchers should submit their completed Form and related materials to the Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Sub-committees at their respective Faculties (Please refer to Section H of this *Guidelines* for the Faculty's Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Sub-committees).

b. For research studies conducted by members of the Engineering and Science Faculties, the completed Form should be returned directly to the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee*. (Please consult Section H of this *Guidelines*).

G. Differentiation from Clinical/Human Research Ethics Committee (CREC)

When you plan to apply for survey ethics approval, please check if your research subjects fall under the following grey areas:

1. In general, projects which embodied physiological measures on human subjects would be reviewed by the CREC.
2. Projects on epidemiological studies with a focus on the general population should normally be reviewed by the SBREC. If the epidemiological studies were "clinical" in nature or involved clinical samples, they should come under the domain of the CREC.
3. Health-related studies should normally be reviewed by the CREC.
4. Projects from the sports science disciplines involving physiological measures should normally go through the CREC, even though questionnaires might also be used.
5. Psychological experiments involving, for instance, eye-hand coordination, should go through the SBREC.

6. Non-physiological behavioral observations, including videotaping, even without involving survey and interviews, should be reviewed by the SBREC.

H. Inquiry

For inquiries, please contact Ms. Sulan Wong at <sulanwong@cuhk.edu.hk> or Ms. Vicky Lin at <vickylin@cuhk.edu.hk.>