

## 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 behaviour by whatever non-clinical means.

According to the University's Policy on Research, Intellectual Property and Knowledge Transfer, 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* (調查及行爲研究操守委員會) (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 for applying for ethics approval from the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* are explained below (Section F of these Guidelines).

Researchers should examine the nature of their research studies to determine if they need to obtain approval from other responsible units within CUHK (e.g. The Joint Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) Hospital Authority New Territories East Cluster (NTEC) Clinical Research Ethics Committee (CREC), Animal Experimentation Ethics Committee (AEEC), University Safety Office/University Laboratory Safety Office).

### C. Types of Review

The *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* conducts two types of review: an expedited review and a full review. According to the research protocol, 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) or not.

## **C1. An Expedited Review**

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

- Participants are unable to give informed consent (e.g. children, individuals with intellectual disabilities or cognitive impairments) (Sections D1 and D3 of these Guidelines).
- Excessive or inappropriate inducements, financial or otherwise, are provided to influence subjects to participate (Section D2 of these Guidelines).
- Deception of participants is involved (Section D4 of these Guidelines).
- The study involves studying sensitive aspects of the participant's own behaviour such as illegal conduct, illicit drug use, suicidality, and sexual conduct.
- 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.
- The study can induce undue psychological stress to participants.
- Pain or discomfort that is higher than a reasonable level is likely to result from participating in the research study.
- 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:

- 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
- 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:

- if these sources are publicly available, or
- 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 Application 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 to 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) and benefits to the individual or to others, a statement that participants are free to decline to participate, significant factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate (including data security) and contact details of the researcher(s) concerned.
- In situations when a third party (e.g. spouses or 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 Application 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 these Guidelines).
- 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 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 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**

University staff members are responsible for seeking 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, staff members should download the Application Form from the website of [the Office of Research and Knowledge Transfer Services \(ORKTS\)](#). The Application Form, together with other relevant documents (e.g. consent form, a copy of the research questionnaire or instrument, research proposal, etc.), should be sent to the appropriate *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Faculty Sub-committee*.

With all the necessary information and documents received, the processing time of each application is approximately 6 to 8 weeks from the time of application. Researchers are advised to apply well in advance of the anticipated approval obtained date.

### **F1. Required Documents**

- For research projects requesting an expedited review, the researcher should provide clear and sufficient information in the Application Form and relevant documents so that the Committee could make a judgment on whether the project in question qualified for an expedited review. If a copy of the research questionnaire or instrument to be used is unavailable, a detailed description of these instruments should be submitted. A full research proposal is not required.
- For projects that require a full review, the researcher should submit a full research proposal, together with a completed Application Form and relevant documents to the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* for close examination of the research procedures and rationales. 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. If necessary, the Committee may request additional materials from researchers to justify their research studies.

### **F2. Submission**

- For research studies conducted by members of the Faculties of Arts, Business Administration, Social Science, Medicine, Law, and Education, researchers should submit

their completed Application Form and related materials to the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Faculty Sub-committees* at their respective Faculties (c/o Faculty Office concerned).

- For research studies conducted by members of the Engineering and Science Faculties, the completed Application Form and related materials should be sent directly to the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Faculty Sub-committee of Social Science* (c/o Faculty Office of Social Science).

## **G. Test Use for Research Purposes**

Both copyrighted protected tests and open access tests are generally used in research. It is a best practice for researchers to have proper arrangements prior to using these tests for research purposes.

For copyright protected tests, users should pay for their use even for research purpose and permission must be obtained from the copyright holder(s) (normally the creator(s) of the test) before using, reproducing, distributing, or displaying in public. Proper documentation on the permitted test such as the test name, edition, publication date of the original or adapted test, and permission to use should be referenced in the research. Same practices should be adopted for derivative works (i.e. a translated version of the test).

For open access tests, they may be used and generated into derivative works without permission of the test creator(s). Nevertheless, an explicit statement is advised to be included in the research regarding free usage or the conditions of usage for other researchers.

The International Test Commission, an association of national psychological associations, test commissions, publishers and other organizations, has released a statement on using tests and other assessment instruments for research purposes. For details, please visit:

[https://www.intestcom.org/files/statement\\_using\\_tests\\_for\\_research.pdf](https://www.intestcom.org/files/statement_using_tests_for_research.pdf).

## **H. Unanticipated Issues and Non-compliance**

An unanticipated issue is any unforeseen or unreasonably expected incident, experience, or outcome that is not described in the application as a risk to participants or others related to either a research intervention or interaction, or the contact of the study in general.

Non-compliance refers to any action that is conducted not in accordance with the approved study by the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee*.

All unanticipated issues and any non-compliance must be reported to the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* promptly after the discovery of occurrence. The *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* will determine if any further action is necessary.

## **I. Differentiation from Clinical 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:

- In general, projects which embodied physiological measures on human subjects would be reviewed by the CREC.
- Projects on epidemiological studies with a focus on the general population should normally be reviewed by the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee*. If the epidemiological studies were "clinical" in nature or involved clinical samples, they should come under the domain of the CREC.
- Health-related studies should normally be reviewed by the CREC.
- Projects from the sports science disciplines involving physiological measures should normally go through the CREC, even though questionnaires might also be used.
- Psychological experiments involving, for instance, eye-hand coordination, should go through the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee*.
- Non-physiological behavioural observations, including videotaping, even without involving survey and interviews, should be reviewed by the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee*.

## **J. Inquiry**

For inquiries, please contact the Secretary of the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* (c/o Faculty Office of Social Science) by email at [fssc02@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:fssc02@cuhk.edu.hk)