THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics

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 participants, and the observations of human participants in experiments. Survey, defined broadly, covers the following areas:

- questionnaire surveys, including telephone and online surveys (regardless of the sample size)
- 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, all research proposals, contracts for consultancies and services or applications for outside practice involving the involvement of human participants in surveys or behavioural studies would need to obtain ethics approval from the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (調查及行為研究操守委員會)* (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 involving human participants in a legal and ethical manner. If research strategies and plans are within the domain of survey and behavioural research (please refer to definition in Section A above), researchers should obtain approval from the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* **BEFORE** they conduct their research studies.

B1. University Staff Members and Research Postgraduates (RPg) Students

Researchers should observe the ethics requirements listed in Section C to H. In particular, the procedures for applying for ethics approval from the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* are explained in Section E 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).

B2. Taught Postgraduate (TPg) and Undergraduate (Ug) Students

The ethics requirements are extended to student assignments, including graduation theses, class projects, etc. Departments or Units concerned should formulate their own internal mechanisms and a timetable for the implementation of the ethics requirements. In case of any violation, the Departments or Units concerned have the full autonomy to take necessary actions and report to the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* for record purposes.

- For course-based student assignments, course instructors have the full responsibility to ensure their students' compliance with the ethics requirements. Although no formal procedures for applying for ethics approval from the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* are required, Departments or Units concerned are required to register their internal review mechanisms.

- For graduation theses or projects which usually take more than one semester for completion, students are required to complete a simplified survey ethics form which serves as a self-monitoring checklist. The completed forms should be approved by their thesis supervisors, or Department Chairperson / Unit Head, or appropriate departmental committees before the commencement of the projects. The approved forms should be placed in the students' student files.

C. Types of Review

The *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* determines – following a thorough review – to exempt an application from full review or go through a full review.

C1. Applications Exempted from Full Review

In general, an application is exempted from full review if any one of the following applies:

- This research will be conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn or assessment of educators. All participants are adults. Some examples are: (a) Evaluate the use of accepted or revised standardized tests; and (b) Evaluate a teaching program.

- The research involves the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behaviour of adult participants. Recorded information cannot readily identify the participant (directly or indirectly/linked), OR any disclosure of responses outside of the research would NOT reasonably place participant at risk (criminal, civil liability, financial, employability, educational advancement, reputation). Some examples are: (a) Survey teachers, nurses, or doctors about a technique or an outcome; (b) Interview managers about a management style or best practice; and (c) Conduct a focus group about an experience or an opinion of a community program.

- This research involves benign behavioural interventions through verbal, written responses, (including data entry or audiovisual recording) from adult participants who prospectively agrees. Recorded information cannot readily identify the participant (directly or indirectly/linked) OR any disclosure of responses outside of the research would NOT reasonably place participant at risk (criminal, civil liability, financial, employability, educational advancement, reputation). Some examples are: (a) Solve puzzles under various noise conditions; (b) Play an economic game; (c) Be exposed to stimuli such as colour, light or sound (at safe levels); and (d) Perform cognitive tasks.

- This is a secondary research project with identifiable Information collected for some other initial activity, if information is publicly available, OR information is recorded in such a way that participant cannot readily be identified (directly or indirectly/linked); and investigator does not contact participants and will not re-identify the participants. An example is: Analyse existing tissue samples or data set which are recorded by the investigator without identifiers

- This is a research on individual or group characteristics or behaviour (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behaviour) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. All participants are adults. Recorded information cannot readily identify the participant (directly or indirectly/linked), OR any disclosure of responses outside of the research would NOT reasonably place participant at risk (criminal, civil liability, financial, employability, educational advancement, reputation).

C2. Applications that Required Full Review

Applications that fail to meet the requirements listed in Section C1 must go through a full review. After reviewing, the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* (a) approve the application, (b) request further information/clarifications, and minor amendments from the PI, or (c) request additional reviews of the protocol by another independent reviewer.

Approval will be granted if it meets ALL of the following conditions:

- Risks to participants are minimized and sound research design does not unnecessarily expose participants to risks;
- Risks to participants are reasonable in relation to anticipated benefits (if any) to participants, and the importance of the knowledge that may reasonably be expected to result;
- Selection of participants is equitable;
- Informed consent will be sought from every prospective participant or participant's legally authorized representative, and will be appropriately documented;
- When appropriate, the research plan makes for adequate provision for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the participants; and
- There are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of participants and to maintain the confidentiality of data.

D. Ethical Guidelines Concerning the Use of Human Participants

Research studies must follow the ethical principles set out in the University's Policy on Research and the Belmont Report which constitutes the ethical principles underpinning research involving human participants.

D1. Informed Consent

Respect for persons requires that participants, to the degree that they are capable, be given the opportunity to choose what shall or shall not happen to them. The researcher must obtain informed consent (either verbal or written) of the human participants according to the following guidelines:

- Voluntary informed consent, in writing, should normally be obtained from any participant who is able to give such consent even for anonymous surveys.
- Research procedures should be explained to the participants before the administration of data collection.
- Participants should be informed that they have the right to terminate the study at any time.
- An information sheet that is easily comprehensible to the potential 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 school children, school consent and parental/guardian consent are deemed sufficient. Students should be clearly informed that their participation in the study is voluntary. Assent consent, written in an easily comprehensible manner at reading level of target participants, should also be used.

- Consent of a parent or a legal guardian is needed for ALL other surveys (anonymous or non-anonymous) involving participants who are aged under 18.

- Justifications must be provided for a waiver of written consent and/or that of documentation of consent.

D2. Undue Influence and Inducement to Participate

- 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 participants should be indicated in details.

D3. Vulnerable Human Participants Who Need Special Consideration

- Vulnerable human 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 participants 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 Participants

- 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.

- A debriefing must be provided to participants.

D5. 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).

- For research data (including public/naturalistic observations) which is not anonymized, 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.

- If a 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. 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 of participants 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. The retention period for research data and record should be stated clearly on the informed consent.

- For research studies involving public/naturalistic observations, the researcher's private data as well as in any published material, observations should record in such a manner that the identities of participants cannot be identified.

D6. Risks to the Participants and the Participants' Wellbeing

- Risks to participants must be minimized[1]; sound research design that does not unnecessarily expose participants to risk should be adopted.

- Risks to participants must be reasonable in relation to anticipated benefits, if any, to participants, and the importance of the knowledge that may reasonably be expected to result.

- Some studies can induce undue psychological stress, pain and discomfort to participants. Studies that involve prolonged and repetitive testing may also cause discomfort, inconvenience, and disruptions of daily activities. Researchers should adopt sound research design that minimizes psychological stress, pain, discomfort and inconvenience of the participants. In the event that the research design can have harmful effects on participants' wellbeing, the researcher must provide justifications for the research design; ensure the participants' safety; and fully compensate the participants.

- For research studies involving public/naturalistic observations, the observations, even if disclosed outside the research, could not reasonably place the participants at risk of criminal or civil liability,

[1] According to the Belmont Report, the term "risk" refers to a possibility that harm may occur and "level of risk" means both to the chance (probability) of experiencing a harm and the severity (magnitude) of the envisioned harm. Minimal risk to participants means that the probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are not greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life or during the performance of routine physical and psychological examinations or tests and that confidentiality is adequately protected *(Source: National Institute of Mental Health)*.

or be damaging to the participant's financial standing, employability, mental well-being, or personal reputation.

E. Procedures for Obtaining Survey Research Ethics Approval

University 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, please follow the below procedures for submitting new applications or amendment of approval applications.

With all the necessary information and documents received, the processing time of each application is approximately 4 weeks from the time of application. Researchers are advised to apply well in advance of the anticipated approval obtained date.

E1. Teaching and Research Staff

- Applications should be submitted via the SBRE E-System. Researchers should provide clear and sufficient information on the electronic application form and relevant documents so that the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* could make a judgment on whether a full review is required. I f a copy of the research questionnaire or instrument to be used is unavailable, a detailed description of these instruments should be submitted.

- For projects that require a full review, the researcher may also need to submit a full research proposal 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.

E2. Research Postgraduate (RPg) Students

- Applications should be submitted via the SBRE E-System. Applications submitted by RPg students will first be directed to their supervisors for preview and comment. Supervisors are responsible for ensuring that all required information is provided before endorsing the submission to the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee*.

E3. Submission of Amendment for Approval Applications

- If there is an amendment on either the project title, research objective(s), or research methodology(ies) of an approved application, a submission for amendment is required.

- For applications approved in Academic Year 2021-22 and after, amendment of an approved application should be submitted via the SBRE E-System.

- For applications approved on or before Academic Year 2020-21, amendment should be made on the prescribed form which can be downloaded from the website of the Office of Research and Knowledge Transfer Services (ORKTS). The completed form, together with other relevant documents, should be sent to the appropriate *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Faculty Sub- committee*:

    - 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).

F. Copyright Clearance for Tests or Research Materials

Both copyright protected tests and open access tests/materials 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/materials, 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/materials, 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: ITC Statement on Test Use for Research Purposes

G. Serious Adverse Event (SAE) and Non-compliance

A serious adverse event 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 serious adverse events and any non-compliance must be reported to the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* via the SBRE E-System promptly after the discovery of occurrence. The *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* will determine if any further action is necessary.

H. 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 embody 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 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.