weizenbaum institut

Guidelines for the establishment and working principles of the Research Ethics Committee at the Weizenbaum Institute

Version: 22 March 2024

Contents

Foreword

The Weizenbaum Institute (WI) made a commitment in its Code of Conduct for Safeguarding Good Research Practice (version of 11 December 2023), in §2 and §7, to set up a committee for research ethics to support compliance with overarching and subject-specific ethical standards.

The committee has the task of supporting researchers in applying for and carrying out research projects by providing advice and, if necessary, specific recommendations for the implementation of these projects and carrying out ethical assessments of research projects (incl. dual use and/or abuse aspects).[1] The work of the committee is based on the above-mentioned WI Code of Conduct for Safeguarding Good Research Practice in its current version, the core values of the institute's mission statement (including openness, participation and sustainability), any subject-specific and interdisciplinary regulations concerning research ethics, relevant legal provisions at state, federal and EU level and other

---

[1]   The term "research project" is defined broadly in this document in order to cover as many applications as possible, e.g. individual, group/unit-based, group/unit/interdisciplinary internal research projects/applications, applications for external research projects based at the WI or carried out with the participation of the WI, externally funded research projects, publication-oriented research projects etc.

relevant standards and materials. When appointing the Research Ethics Committee, care must be taken to ensure that there is a good balance of the disciplines and methodological expertise represented at the WI.

In the following three sections, this guideline deals with (1) ethical principles of research, (2) the size and composition of the WI Research Ethics Committee, and (3) its working methods and procedures. Concepts from comparable institutions (in particular the Center for Advanced Internet Studies [CAIS], GESIS Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society [HIIG] and the WZB Berlin Social Science Research Centre) and relevant research ethics and policy literature were taken into account when drawing up the guidelines (see end of document).[2]

(1) Ethical principles of research

The following principles are intended to provide a framework for the discussion of ethical issues and to promote reflection on the ethical implications of research at the WI. They are intended to guide researchers without restricting their academic freedom (Basic Law [Grundgesetz], Art. 5, para. 3). They complement the broader commitment to good research practice at the WI, including the ethical analysis and reporting of results and the fair treatment of partners in research. In general, the primary responsibility for compliance with these principles lies with the individual researcher. Researchers should be aware that these principles may conflict with each other in different contexts, requiring reflection on how such conflicts can be resolved and whether it is ethical to continue the research.

1) **Responsibilities**: Researchers have a responsibility to conduct their research in a manner that is compatible with the well-being of the planet, of wider society, the disciplines involved, the institute, their colleagues, students, the people they study and themselves.

2) **Autonomy**: The autonomy of the individual must be respected and protected. All individuals should have the right to decide for themselves whether they wish to participate in a study and the right to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. Persons with impaired decision-making capacity must be protected.

3) **Consent**: Voluntary and informed consent must be obtained from research participants to safeguard the autonomy of the individual, in full compliance with legal provisions. Consent should not be seen as a one-off act of signing a form, but rather as a communicative process that extends over the entire course of a research project. In general, informed consent should include at least the communication of the research procedure, the purpose, the expected risks and benefits and the use of the data to be collected – please be aware that additional legal provisions might also apply. If full informed consent is not possible, for example in projects where informed consent would compromise the research design, it must be ensured that (1) there are no undisclosed risks that are more than minimal, and (2)

---

[2] Section (1) in particular incorporates key points initially developed by the WZB for their institutional Research Ethics Policy. We are grateful to the WZB Research Ethics Committee for its advice and support while developing this WI guideline on research ethics.

whenever possible and appropriate, research participants are subsequently informed and have the right to subsequently withdraw participation.

4) **No coercion**: The decision to participate in a study must be made freely and without explicit or implicit coercion (examples of implicit coercion include excessive compensation for participation or recruitment by people in positions of power).

5) **Welfare**: Every effort must be made to ensure the physical, psychological and social well-being of research participants, others affected by the research, the researchers themselves (esp. early career researchers and/or researchers on short-term contracts) and/or workers outside of the research team (e.g. translators, guides, community partners, crowd workers, coders/annotators). Research should generally minimise risks, avoid anticipated harms (including informational harm, e.g. breaches of privacy, data and/or algorithm discrimination) and avoid risks of increasing inequalities.

6) **Equity**: The benefits and burdens of research should be shared fairly. In general, the benefits should not be withheld from some people for the benefit of others.

7) **Public benefit**: Research that involves risks or costs to humans must have clear social and/or academic value. Researchers should not expose people or organisations to risk, even with their consent, without potential social and/or academic benefits.

8) **Privacy**: Researchers must respect privacy and anonymity preferences. This principle goes beyond mere compliance with federal and European data protection laws. Especially for internet and platform research or in general when using data not directly collected from data subjects, this might involve reflecting on the ethical expectations users attach to the venue in which they are interacting, particularly around issues of privacy – both for individual participants as well as the community as a whole.[3]

9) **Avoid misuse**: Research results, whether theoretical or applied, should not pose an undue burden on, or risk to research participants or society in general. Researchers should anticipate the possibility of dual use of their research (e.g., for military applications) or misuse (e.g., for criminal purposes) and disseminate the results in a way that minimises these risks.

10) **Reflexivity**: Researchers should openly discuss ethical aspects of their research in their writings and public presentations.

---

[3] In cases where data collection involves e.g. automated scraping of (semi-) public data or using an application programming interface (API) to access private data, legal frameworks, such as the General Data Protection Regulation (available online at https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:02016R0679-20160504) must be obeyed; strong measures must be taken to protect the identity of individual subjects against their (re-) identification; and – last but not least – a risk assessment must be carried out in order to demonstrate the clear, overwhelming benefits of pursuing the research project vis-à-vis its potential risks and harms in terms of (re-) identifying sensitive and/or personal data relating to human individuals.

(2) Research Ethics Committee: size and composition

The WI Research Ethics Committee has seven permanent members who are authorised to vote and make decisions. All committee members must have research experience (e.g. acquisition of third-party funding, experience in the implementation of scientific, preferably empirical projects). The committee should also include expertise in research ethics and (data protection) law. The committee consists of:

\ a chairperson
\ four internal members with a balanced consideration of the disciplines and methodological expertise represented at the WI
\ an ombudsperson for good research practice
\ a data protection officer

The committee is supported by a research officer who also attends the committee meetings. One of the four ombudspersons at the WI becomes a member of the ethics committee for up to two years. The other members are elected by the Institute Council for up to two years. Re-election is possible. Temporary members and experts are appointed and consulted by the ethics committee itself.

If necessary, other internal and/or external experts are admitted to the committee as temporary members or reviewers (without formal voting/decision-making rights). The committee is quorate if four or more permanent members are involved in a decision.

These guidelines and the work and composition of the committee are evaluated at regular intervals – for the first time approximately one year after the committee is established – by the management of the WI in cooperation with the committee members.

(3) Working methods, principles and procedures of the Research Ethics Committee

MODE OF OPERATION

The WI Research Ethics Committee is an independent body and is not bound by instructions in the performance of its duties. The advisory, support and examination services offered by the committee are tailored to the needs of the researchers at the WI.
A successful research ethics (self-) evaluation or a favourable vote by the Research Ethics Committee must be obtained at the latest before the start of data collection for a project. Authorisation may not be granted retroactively.
The WI Research Ethics Committee does not review projects that have already been approved by another research ethics committee. It can be contacted by e-mail on an ongoing basis – also for consultations prior to submissions of projects for review. A sub-page to be created on the WI website will contain the relevant information and contact details.

A research ethics review involves up to three steps (see Process Steps section below for details):

1. self-evaluation by the researchers
2. evaluation of the project on the basis of a standard questionnaire and
3. full review

The committee meets regularly in order to make swift decisions on applications requiring review. The frequency of meetings depends on the volume of applications. Decisions on project evaluations below the full review level are made on an ongoing basis. The meeting dates and application deadlines will be published on the above-mentioned website and, where applicable, on the intranet.

Questions and/or requests for support can be submitted to the ethics committee via the dedicated email address researchethics@weizenbaum-institut.de. The online application form can be accessed at https://limesurvey.weizenbaum-institut.de/index.php/523492. The committee endeavours to review applications within approximately two to four weeks of submission. The total review period and the time required to reach a decision may vary, depending on the steps involved (see below). Decisions are made confidentially, primarily in closed circulation procedures, meetings or hearings with project participants within the above-mentioned time frame.

The committee meets at least once a year to evaluate its own work processes and procedures and optimise them in line with requirements. It reports on its work to the Institute Council in compliance with personal rights, labour law and other relevant regulations.

WORKING PRINCIPLES

1) Conflicts of interest: Committee members may not participate in the review of their own projects or the projects they supervise. In such cases, the committee member must withdraw from the deliberations and cannot vote on the project. An alternate member will take that person's place, provided they do not also have a conflict of interest.

Other cases of potential conflicts of interest, whether actual or apparent, should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. In some situations, it may be most appropriate for the committee member to withdraw altogether; in other cases, the committee member may participate in the deliberations but abstain from voting.

2) Confidentiality: Unless they seek the advice of an external expert, committee members are not permitted to discuss project proposals with non-committee members.

The members of the Research Ethics Committee are obliged to treat the proceedings of a committee meeting confidentially, including the specific details of the studies examined and the contributions (and votes) of individual committee members and internal or external experts.

Written records of committee decisions (including previous decisions) and/or minutes of meetings may only be viewed by the Research Ethics Committee and authorised employees of the WI.

PROCESS STEPS

1. Self-evaluation by the researchers

As a first step, every research project at the WI should be examined by the project leaders[4] themselves with regard to the ethical principles mentioned at the beginning of this document.

In particular, there are no grounds for an in-depth ethical review if the research project includes

1. no manipulation of social processes (e.g. interventions, changes to rules in organisations, manipulation of news feeds and other formats on online media, field experiments),
2. no collection of new data from living individuals,
3. no collection or processing of data that can be used to directly or indirectly identify individuals (this often excludes data that is already publicly available and for which there is no expectation of privacy),
4. no recombination or re-utilisation of existing data with a noticeably increased risk of (re-)identifiability of individuals and
5. no measures that contradict the above-mentioned ethical principles and overarching research principles (in particular the WI Code of Conduct for Safeguarding Good Research Practice).

Research projects that fulfil these criteria and therefore do not require an in-depth ethics review include, but are not limited to:

\ theoretical or conceptual projects without data collection and data analysis,

\ historical projects that analyse data on people who are no longer alive,

\ replications or analyses of publicly available data that do not entail a plausible expectation of identification of individuals, or

\ analyses of public data, such as speeches by politicians or public documents where there is no expectation of privacy.

If there are no reasons for an in-depth ethical review, but the researchers require confirmation from the Research Ethics Committee (e.g. for publication projects or third-party funding applications), they can request this from the committee using the general ethics review application form. A brief description of the project must also be attached. The responsible officer checks the application for plausibility and then confirms to the researchers that there are no ethical reservations against carrying out the project in accordance with these guidelines.

2. In-depth review based on the research ethics evaluation questionnaire

Research projects at the WI that cannot be exempted from an in-depth ethics review should apply for an ethical risk assessment based on a questionnaire. Typically, an in-depth review

---

[4] The "project leader" is the person heading the project and bearing responsibility for its realisation. In the event that the project leader is a doctoral researcher or a research assistant, the head of the research group should be involved in the application for an ethics review. In the case of inter-institutional projects, the research ethics review is generally carried out at the institution of the project leader.

is necessary for projects that collect new data on living subjects, conduct new experiments with human participants, collect or use personal data[5] or combine existing data in ways that entail a risk of (re-)identifying individuals.

The completed questionnaire must be submitted to the Research Ethics Committee together with a brief description of the project. The questionnaire and the brief description will normally be checked for plausibility by a member of the committee within two weeks of submission. The applicants are responsible for ensuring that the questionnaire is completed truthfully and for preparing the brief description of the project. Documented project reviews are archived centrally and confidentially.

If there are no indications that would lead to a full review, the researchers will receive immediate confirmation that there are no ethical reservations about conducting the project in accordance with these guidelines. Examples of projects for which a decision can be made on the basis of the questionnaire and the brief project descriptions include data collections that do not collect sensitive data and for which data protection is guaranteed; as well as laboratory or field experiments that do not involve deception or risks for the participants.

In all other cases, the project will undergo a full review by the Research Ethics Committee, unless the committee can clarify outstanding questions through direct queries to the applicants.

The ethics review does not include a full data protection check. If the planned project includes collecting or processing personal data, we strongly recommend that WI's data protection officer (DPO) carries out a review with regard to legal aspects of data protection and compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation of the European Union (GDPR). In general, it will be possible to apply for this review alongside an ethics review – subject to the respective needs of each individual research project. The data protection review can also be carried out independently from an ethics review and it can involve additional requests for further information by the DPO.

3. Full review

If it is not possible to clarify all questions on the basis of the questionnaire, the brief description and any direct queries to the applicants, the committee will carry out a full review of the research project. A full review does not mean that there is a suspicion of a violation of ethical principles. This kind of review is carried out in cases where, due to the use of particular research designs or certain scientific methods, the committee requires more extensive information and advice before it can confirm that the research project conforms to ethical principles.

---

[5] For a useful definition of "personal data", please see Art. 4 (1) of the EU General Data Protection Regulation (available online via https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:02016R0679-20160504).

Examples of projects that require a full review may include studies that do not obtain the consent of participants for data collection or work with deception (including the use of AI-generated means such as deepfakes) and do not subsequently inform participants of such facts; or studies that involve manipulation, e.g. interventions in social processes, changes to rules in organisations, manipulation of news feeds and other formats on online media. If the research design makes it necessary to temporarily deviate from such basic rules in individual cases, applicants are expected to state this explicitly in the brief project description and/or the questionnaire and to justify the deviations accordingly (see also the ethical principles of research above, especially No. 3 on consent).[6]

The committee members decide whether and in what form additional internal or external expertise should be recruited for the assessment of an application. This can be done either in the form of expert opinions or by including temporary members in the ethics committee. The applicants must be heard at their own request or at the request of committee members. The members take a vote on an application based on the application documents, any further information provided by the applicants and, where necessary, assessments by external experts. The chairperson endeavours to reach a consensual decision within the Research Ethics Committee. If a consensus cannot be reached, the committee shall decide by simple majority. In the event of a tie, the chairperson has the casting vote.

The Research Ethics Committee concludes the procedure with one of the following votes. Each vote is justified in writing, in particular with regard to the specification of conditions and revisions:

\ <u>Positive vote</u>: There are no ethical concerns about the implementation of the project.
\ <u>Positive vote with conditions</u>: There are no ethical objections to the implementation of the project, provided that specified conditions are met.
\ <u>Negative vote with the possibility of resubmission</u>: There are ethical concerns about the implementation of the project, but a resubmission is possible after revision.
\ <u>Negative vote without the possibility of resubmission</u>: There are serious ethical concerns that fundamentally speak against the implementation of the project.

In the event of a negative vote without the possibility of resubmission, the applicants can present counter-arguments and make one request for a new referral and decision by the Research Ethics Committee.

If, after a positive vote has been issued, there are significant changes or events in the project in terms of research ethics, the committee must be notified immediately. The committee will then review whether the evaluation procedure needs to be resumed.

The applicants are responsible for implementing the results of the review and for ensuring that the project is carried out legally and ethically.

---

[6]   Deception means information likely to mislead participants about the nature of the research. For further information on "deception" please see the guidelines of the American Psychological Association (particularly sections 8.07-8.08 on "Deception in Research" and "Debriefing", available at https://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index).

Further information and literature

ALLEA: All European Academies, The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity: Revised Edition 2023, Berlin: ALLEA Secretariat 23 June 2023. https://doi.org/10.26356/ECOC (last accessed: 09 October 2023)

Centre for Responsible Digitalisation (ZEVEDI), Research Ethics for AI Research Projects: Guidelines to Support the Work of Ethics Committees at Universities, Darmstadt: ZEVEDI, 27 February 2023. https://zevedi.de/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ZEVED_AI-Research-Ethics_web_2023.pdf (last accessed: 17 October 2023).

Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Authorship and AI Tools: COPE position statement, 13 February 2023. https://publicationethics.org/cope-position-statements/ai-author (last accessed: 11 October 2023)

DGPs Commission "Incentive system, abuse of power and scientific misconduct", Nicole Bössel, Annette Kluge, Daniel Leising, Dorothee Mischkowski, Le Vy Phan, Manfred Schmitt and Jutta Stahl, Anreizsystem, Machtmissbrauch und wissenschaftliches Fehlverhalten. Eine Analyse zum funktionalen Zusammenhang zwischen strukturellen Bedingungen und unethischem Verhalten in der Wissenschaft, Berlin: Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie e.V. (DGPs), 27 June 2023. https://www.dgps.de/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Berichte/Bericht_AMWF20230626.pdf (last accessed: 09 November 2023).

Executive Committee of the DFG, Statement by the Executive Committee of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) on the Influence of Generative Models of Text and Image Creation on Science and the Humanities and on the DFG's Funding Activities, Bonn: DFG September 2023. https://www.dfg.de/resource/blob/289676/89c03e7a7a8a024093602995974832f9/230921-statement-executive-committee-ki-ai-data.pdf (last accessed: 22 March 2024).

Ferretti, Agata, Marcello Ienca, Mark Sheehan, Alessandro Blasimme, Edward S. Dove, Bobbie Farsides, Phoebe Friesen et al. Ethics Review of Big Data Research: What Should Stay and What Should Be Reformed? BMC Medical Ethics 22, No. 1 (December 2021): 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-021-00616-4 (last accessed: 19 January 2024).

Fournier, Cathy, Suzanne Stewart, Joshua Adams, Clayton Shirt and Esha Mahabir, Systemic Disruptions: Decolonising Indigenous Research Ethics Using Indigenous Knowledges, in: Research Ethics 19, No. 3 (July 2023): 325-40. https://doi.org/10.1177/17470161231169205 (last accessed: 17 October 2023)

franzke, aline shakti, Anja Bechmann, Michael Zimmer, Charles M. Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR), Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0. Chicago: AoIR, 2020. https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf (last accessed: 30 November 2023).

Frisch, Katrin, Felix Hagenström and Nele Reeg, Wissenschaftliche Fairness: Wissenschaft zwischen Integrität und Fehlverhalten, Bielefeld: transcript Verlag 2022. https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839459669 (last accessed: 16 October 2023)

GESIS: Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences, Regeln zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis, Mannheim: GESIS 1 June 2022. https://www.gesis.org/fileadmin/upload/institut/leitbild/GESIS_Regeln_gute_wissenschaftliche_Praxis_Forschungsdatenleitlinie_Autorschaft.pdf (last accessed: 23 April 2024)

Hayward, Ashley, Erynne Sjoblom, Stephanie Sinclair and Jaime Cidro, A New Era of Indigenous Research: Community-Based Indigenous Research Ethics Protocols in Canada, in: Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics 16, No. 4 (October 2021): 403-17. https://doi.org/10.1177/15562646211023705 (last accessed: 16 October 2023)

Hibbin, R. A., G. Samuel and G. E. Derrick. From "a Fair Game" to "a Form of Covert Research": Research Ethics Committee Members' Differing Notions of Consent and Potential Risk to Participants Within Social Media Research. Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics 13, No. 2 (1 April 2018): 149–59. https://doi.org/10.1177/1556264617751510 (last accessed: 19 January 2024).

Kapoor, Sayash, Emily Cantrell, Kenny Peng, Thanh Hien Pham, Christopher A. Bail, Odd Erik Gundersen, Jake M. Hofman et al., REFORMS: Reporting Standards for Machine Learning Based Science. arXiv 19 September 2023. https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2308.07832 (last accessed: 16 January 2024).

Markham, Annette and Elizabeth Buchanan, Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0), Chicago: Association of Internet Researchers 2012. https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf (last accessed: 30 November 2023).

Max Planck Society, Guidelines and Rules of the Max Planck Society on a Responsible Approach to Freedom of Research and Research Risks, Munich: MPG 17 March 2017. https://www.mpg.de/197392/researchFreedomRisks.pdf (last accessed: 22 March 2024).

Metcalf, Jacob and Kate Crawford. Where Are Human Subjects in Big Data Research? The Emerging Ethics Divide. Big Data & Society 3, No. 1 (1 June 2016): 2053951716650211. https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951716650211 (last accessed: 19 January 2024).

Moher, David, Lex Bouter, Sabine Kleinert, Paul Glasziou, Mai Har Sham, Virginia Barbour, Anne-Marie Coriat, Nicole Foeger and Ulrich Dirnagl, The Hong Kong Principles for Assessing Researchers: Fostering Research Integrity, in: PLOS Biology 18, No. 7 (16 July 2020): e3000737. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pbio.3000737 (last accessed: 11 October 2023)

German Data Forum (RatSWD), Forschungsethische Grundsätze und Prüfverfahren in den Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften, RatSWD Output Series, Vol. 9(5), Berlin: RatSWD 11 July 2017. https://doi.org/10.17620/02671.1 (last accessed: 09 October 2023)

Rau, Jan, Felix Münch and Mani Asli, Social Media Research Assessment Template for Ethical Scholarship (SOCRATES): Your Politely Asking Data Ethics Guide. Hamburg: Leibniz-Institute for Media Research (Hans-Bredow-Institut), 2021. https://leibniz-hbi.github.io/socrates/ (last accessed: 30 November 2023).

Samuel, Gabrielle, Gemma E. Derrick and Thed van Leeuwen. The Ethics Ecosystem: Personal Ethics, Network Governance and Regulating Actors Governing the Use of Social Media Research Data. Minerva 57, No. 3 (1 September 2019): 317–43. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11024-019-09368-3 (last accessed: 19 January 2024).

WI, Code of Conduct for Safeguarding Good Research Practice, Berlin: WI 11 December 2023. https://www.weizenbaum-institut.de/media/WI_allgemein/Code_of_conduct_for_safe-guarding_good_research_practice_at_WI_en.pdf (last accessed: 07 February 2024).

Acknowledgments