



UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

## *Sociology Department*

# *Procedures for Research Ethics Review and Related Issues*

*(March 2024)*

The Sociology Department at UCT acknowledges the importance and relevance of well-defined and properly supported codes, protocols and standards to govern the ethics of research, including especially research – including most research conducted by sociologists – that involves human participants, either directly or through individually identifiable data collected by other researchers from and on human participants. The Department is committed to ensuring that research is subject to appropriate ethics review as well as deepening awareness of ethics matters among student and departmental researchers.

Research with human participants is conducted by a range of researchers in the Sociology Department. Some research is conducted by under-graduate and post-graduate students as a coursework requirement in some courses. Post-graduate students conduct research for their dissertations. Departmental researchers (professors, lecturers, post-doctoral researchers and others) conduct research. Finally, non-UCT researchers who are visiting the department may conduct research whilst at UCT. In line with UCT policy, all research involving human participants is subject to some form of review.<sup>1</sup> Research that does not involve human participants may involve ethical issues, and therefore often benefits from appropriate review also. These Guidelines explain the procedures that the Sociology Department follows with respect to research ethics review.

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<sup>1</sup> See the [UCT Guideline for Risk-Based Ethical Review of Research \(Human Participants\)](#)

The Sociology Department's procedures are governed by the policies of the University as a whole (as adopted by Senate) and the Humanities Faculty in particular. The Humanities Faculty published faculty guidelines on research ethics<sup>2</sup> as well as a formal policy. It is imperative that all researchers in Sociology familiarize themselves with the faculty guidelines.

## 1. The purpose of research ethics review

The purpose of the ethics review procedures in the Sociology Department is to assist researchers in conducting research responsibly. As researchers, we have an obligation to carefully consider any risks of harm to participants in our research. Generally, we should seek to minimize such risks. Sometimes, however, a risk of harm may be defensible, but if there is a significant risk of harm, then there need to be very good reasons for proceeding with the research. The purpose of ethics review is not to 'police' researchers. Procedures will not be used to prevent responsible research. The procedures are also designed to avoid imposing unnecessarily onerous obligations on researchers. The procedures in the Humanities Faculty are designed to promote responsible research with the minimum administrative costs to the researchers or their colleagues who conduct reviews.

## 2. Principles underlying Research Ethics Review

The Sociology Department's approach to research ethics review is based on the following four principles:

- a) Research must be conducted to high ethical standards.
- b) Research ethics review entails a combination of *researcher-focused deliberation* and *project-specific clearance* procedures.
- c) Research should be subject to review by a researcher (or researchers) who is (or are) *not* involved in the research and have appropriate expertise to make an informed assessment of the risks of harm to participants in the research.
- d) The administrative burden of research ethics review should be proportional to the risk of harm, and procedures should be designed and implemented accordingly.

In the Humanities Faculty at UCT, responsibility for ethics review is generally devolved by the Humanities Faculty Research Ethics Committee (REC) to departments and research institutes. The Sociology Department has its own REC, which is ultimately responsible for research ethics review in the department. The 2024 Sociology Department REC comprises four members of staff and one postdoctoral fellow. Two additional members may be co-opted onto the REC if additional or specialist expertise is required. One member of the REC serves as its Chair. Members serving on the REC are not remunerated. Quorum in the REC requires at least two members.

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<sup>2</sup> [Humanities Research Ethics Guidebook](#)

The REC is responsible for ensuring that researchers in the Sociology Department participate regularly in appropriate deliberation over the ethical challenges that arise when conducting research, and that projects with a significant risk of harm are subject to appropriate prior clearance. Deliberation entails participation in formal as well as informal discussions of actual research, proposed research, and specific challenges. Postgraduate students, especially, should participate in regular discussions of ethical issues. Clearance entails the REC considering research proposals prior to the commencement of the research. In the case of research that needs to be reviewed, the Chair of the REC decides whether a specific research proposal should be reviewed by a single reviewer (in which case the assessment needs to be endorsed by the REC, either in a face-to-face meeting or through email), a selection of REC members, or the entire REC.

Not all research needs to be reviewed by the REC. The review of students' research is, in general, devolved to the relevant supervisor(s). The supervisor(s) will refer a student's proposed research to the REC if either (a) it entails clear and significant risks of harm or (b) the supervisor(s) and student are unable to reach consensus on whether the student's proposed research is ethically responsible. Departmental researchers should submit details of proposed research to the Chair of the REC, who might decide that the research raises no significant ethical issues and does not need to be reviewed formally. Either a supervisor or the REC chair may call on external expertise in assessing the need for formal clearance.

The role of the REC is primarily facilitative and educational: Its objective is to reach consensus with individual researchers over what is entailed in ethically responsible research. If the REC is unable to approve a research proposal, then the affected researcher may appeal to the Humanities Faculty REC.

The Sociology Department recognizes that many major ethical challenges need to be considered on an ongoing basis, and not simply through the review of a prior research proposal. Therefore, the Sociology Department attaches considerable weight to its programme of deliberative activities alongside its clearance activity.

### **3. Some Common Ethical Concerns with Sociological Research**

Research often throws up unusual or unanticipated issues, but some issues recur regularly. These include the following:

- a) Are people who participate in research consenting to participation with adequate information on the project? Are they provided with information in a form that is easily understood? Note that written consent is often inappropriate. Moreover, consent is not always required: Deception is sometimes defensible.
- b) Insofar as people are providing individually identifiable data, how will the anonymity of the participants or the confidentiality of their data be ensured?
- c) Will individuals or groups of people be identified in the ensuing publications? Is there a risk of harm arising from the representation of people or groups?

- d) Is there any risk of harm arising from participation itself? For example, participants might be upset by certain questions. If some harm does arise or seem to arise, what will the researcher do?
- e) If the research involves 'vulnerable' populations – especially children or prisoners – how does the researcher, ensure that they are not exploited or abused?
- f) Are participants in the research told who they should contact (for example, the Departmental REC) if they have any concern with the research?

#### 4. Procedures for Postgraduate Student Researchers

- a) In order to register for a PhD, Research Masters or the dissertation component of a coursework-based Master's degree, students are required to familiarize themselves with departmental and faculty policies and procedures on research ethics. Students will have to confirm that they have done so in their Memorandum of Understanding.
- b) Whilst planning their research, all postgraduate students are required to discuss appropriate research ethics with their **supervisor(s)**; students' supervisors have primary responsibility for considering ethical aspects of postgraduate students' dissertation or thesis research.
- c) All postgraduate students (including honours students) are required to discuss ethics in their proposal and complete a short Research Ethics Application Form prior to beginning their research. Students submit this completed form to their supervisor, who will pass it onto the postgraduate administrator who will then notify the Departmental REC.
- d) If the supervisor or REC considers that the student's research entails a significant risk of harm or raises other important ethical issues, then the student's application will be considered by the REC. The REC might require additional information on the student's proposed research.
- e) PhD and Research Masters students are required to present detailed research proposals to the Sociology Department for the Department's approval within about six months of their first registration. The **proposal must cover research ethics**. PhD and Research Masters students' proposals must be approved by the Department before students are permitted to re-register. The PhD presentation sessions provide an important opportunity for deliberation over research ethics, and postgraduate students are required to attend and participate in these sessions.
- f) Thereafter, postgraduate students are required to discuss research ethics at least once per year with their supervisor(s), regardless of whether or not their research involves human participants or the risk of harm thereto. If problems arise in the research process, students

must discuss these timeously with their supervisor(s), who might decide to include other researchers in further deliberation.

- g) Students are required to attend seminars on research ethics and presentations of research proposals and findings by other students, as well as presentations by members of the department, in which research ethics are discussed. As students begin to write up their research, it is imperative that they participate in deliberation over the ethics of representation of individuals and groups.
- h) The student and supervisor must confirm each year, in the 'Annual Supplement' MOU, that the student is compliant with Faculty and Departmental policy on research ethics.

### **5. Preliminary research or pilot studies**

- Does UCT require students/researchers to undertake ethical risk assessments and obtain ethics clearance for pilot studies involving human participants that are undertaken to inform the writing of a research proposal?

This will be assessed on a case-by-case basis where the REC chair will make this decision rather than the researcher. i.e. The researcher should approach the chair with the details and ask if they can go-ahead, on the proviso that it is:

- a) a small -scale pilot of low ethical risk that discards the data i.e., it is not used for research but only to inform the proposal, and
- b) the full project will be submitted for approval, and
- c) ethical principles including consent and protection of participant privacy etc., should never-the-less be carefully implemented.

### **6. Procedures for Visiting Researchers**

Visiting researchers are required to submit a formal application to the REC for research ethics clearance if the research involves UCT staff or students as participants, or data collected by UCT researchers that are not in the public domain, or if the research is linked to UCT in some other way.

### **7. Procedures for Departmental Researchers**

Professors, lecturers, post-doctoral and other researchers are required to submit a formal application to the REC for research ethics clearance if their research involves human participants. The Department has a standard application form that does not take long to complete. Only one application needs to be submitted for a multi-year research project unless there are major and consequential changes in the design of the research or the research context. The Chair of the REC

may decide that the research does not require prior clearance or will decide how it should be reviewed.

Researchers are also required to participate on a regular basis in deliberations over research ethics in (a) sessions where students present their research proposals, (b) regular departmental or other seminars, and (c) dedicated research ethics seminars.

## **8. Procedures for Coursework-Related Research**

If any under- or postgraduate course requires that that students conduct research involving human participants, then the course convenor may either submit (a) a composite application as if this was a departmental researcher's project (in which case individual students do not need to submit separate applications) or (b) separate applications for each individual student.

## **4. Reporting Requirements**

Each year the Departmental REC is required to report to the Humanities Faculty REC on research ethics review in the Department. In order that the REC can report as required, supervisors and convenors are required to submit timeously the details of all the students they supervise and any coursework-related research in courses that they teach or convene. Supervisors must report each year on their students' compliance with the Department's research ethics requirements.

## **5. Health-Related Research**

Procedures for health-related research are more complicated than for most sociological research. If you are conducting health-related research, please consult the Humanities Faculty guidelines and the Inter-Faculty Human Research Ethics Committee (IFHREC) on this.

## **6. Authorship and the use of data**

UCT has a strong policy on authorship, i.e., on who should and who should not be included as an author or coauthor of a scholarly publication. Please consult the university and faculty policy on this. The Humanities Faculty also has guidelines with respect to the use of data.

## **7. Professional Codes**

The South African Sociological Association does not have its own Code of Ethics. The HSRC does:  
**Human Sciences Research Council: Code of Research Ethics:**  
<https://hsrc.ac.za/who-we-are/our-standards/>

For international examples, see:

**American Sociological Association: Code of Ethics (2018):**

[https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/asa\\_code\\_of\\_ethics-](https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/asa_code_of_ethics-)

**British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice (2017):**

[https://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa\\_statement\\_of\\_ethical\\_practice.pdf](https://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf)

**International Sociological Association: Code of Ethics (2001):**

<https://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/code-of-ethics>

**Protection of Personal Information Act (POPIA)**

<https://uct.ac.za/protection-personal-information-act-popia>