



Development Of A Framework For The Evaluation Of Social Science Research Ethics

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in collaboration with

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Commissioned by the ESRC

September 2003

The Development of a Framework for the Evaluation of Social Science Research Ethics

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1. Introduction

This Background Paper sets out the context for the ESRC's proposal to develop new national guidelines for the evaluation of social science research and the objectives this has and how they might be realised. The authors here have been commissioned by the ESRC to help build such a framework, through a range of activities, described below, between September 2003 and April 2004.

2. Previous ESRC review

Following an earlier Report prepared in the autumn of 2002 (see attached summary document) the ESRC is interested in developing new, robust and widely shared guidelines for the ethical scrutiny of social science research. As authors of that earlier Report, and complemented here by Professor Mary Boulton's expertise and experience, we are aware of the importance of securing such an objective through a broadly based consultative process supported by informed documentation. This is especially because, as we noted in our Report:

Overall, there is widespread agreement amongst universities, where most research is conducted, on what research is, what the major research ethics issues are, and appropriate mechanisms for ensuring that research is ethical. Despite these shared themes, there is a wide diversity in how developed such systems are; in the specific details of research governance mechanisms; and whether the onus for ensuring good ethical practice should be with individual researchers, host institution, or research funder.

This means that general support for new guidelines will only be forthcoming as a result of engaging with a broad range of stakeholders who hold contrasting views. At the same time, ESRC is keen to ensure that the guidelines will be used in the future as the principles on which ethical social science research will be conducted, and as such, there will need to be some recommended mechanisms for both overseeing guideline compliance while also refreshing and updating guidance where and when appropriate.

3. Our approach

The principal objective of this work is to prepare a set of ethics guidelines that will both meet ESRC requirements and have value to a much broader range of stakeholders. This relates to those agencies supporting social science research, as well as to those formally outside social science but increasingly engaged with it at a national level (such as the other Research Councils through the deepening of interdisciplinary research). In order to build guidelines that will provide both a strengthening of current ESRC requirements and be welcomed by other social science constituencies, consultation and dialogue with different groups will be a key feature of the work throughout its duration.

A set of guidelines for all types of social science and interdisciplinary research will be difficult to produce. As our earlier Report found, the professional associations all provide very good codes of practice already though they vary in how far they are prescriptive or aspirational. One way of attempting to combine the best of both approaches and also encompass very different models of research would be to describe a set of basic guidelines for ethical scrutiny and practice and to provide a discussion of how they might be interpreted in different research contexts. More detailed guidance could then be provided in relation to specific approaches to and contexts for research, including interdisciplinary research. This could form the basic format of the Guidelines published by ESRC, and given that this format is sensitive to diversity, we expect that it would be more likely to ensure widespread support across the UK social science communities.

Beyond the provision of a set of guidelines the work of the group will also involve the preparation of documents that will be of long-term generic value to a range of users, including the following:

- A paper that explores the relationship between social science and bioscience data and the implications this has for conducting ethical research, especially of a trans-science nature, as well as where legitimate boundaries between them might be drawn
- A paper that discusses the current international and regulatory framework and possible changes ahead, especially at the European level where there are important issues yet to be resolved in relation to FP6.
- A paper that examines the global, especially developing countries context for social science research where international collaboration may occur in a context of highly uneven practice or unequal resource for the proper ethical review of research.
- A paper based on a purposively sampled survey of ESRC designated departments (c.90), and selected other organisations, that will explore research training provision in ethics among postgraduate students and university and other organisations' staff;
- A paper that complements the current Nuffield Foundation's review of university ethics research practices that will provide a more fine-grained analysis of the mechanisms by which research comes to be considered for ethical review and the logistical issues they raise.

4. Awareness of other ethics projects and the wider context

We are aware of the need to avoid duplication of effort in regard to the review and development of ethics guidelines, and in this regard are keen to work with other groups to ensure mutual interests and needs are best met. Several other initiatives have been taken within the UK and Europe recently, with which we are in contact: these include:

- The work being undertaken by Professor Anthea Tinker for the Nuffield Foundation on mapping university practice in the area
- The work being developed by the Cabinet Office regarding government social research on new guidelines for ethical scrutiny and assurance
- The DoH work for the Research Governance Framework and its implementation in both clinical and social care/services research
- The DiES work on ethical scrutiny to be undertaken by the Children and Young People Unit
- The Wellcome Trust's ongoing review of ethics within the context of its Biomedical Ethics programme
- The international EC funded RESPECT project that seeks to build general guidelines for all research across Europe
- The activities of the European Commission (DG RTD) and, in particular, the research ethics framework likely to be adopted for Framework Programme 6 (FP6); and how this will impact on UK debates, and UK social science research generally.
- The activities of the European Group on Ethics and Science in New Technologies
- CODEX and related projects, based at Uppsala University, that seek to draw up a directory of ethical codes/practices across member states

5. A project website

A dedicated website for the project is to be established. This will provide a focus for stakeholders, as well as providing a UK-based ethics resource upon which a range of institutions and individual social scientists can draw upon both during the project and after its completion.

The project website is envisaged as a key component for achieving the following goals:

- Promoting the project to a wide range of potential stakeholders, including universities, research councils and other funding bodies, professional associations and learned societies, government departments, and other organisations such as charities and voluntary sector bodies, and consumer and patient organisations.

- Enabling stakeholders to access material during the duration of the project, extending the channels available for consultation, and encouraging greater participation by different constituencies throughout the project's various stages

6. Consultation with stakeholders

We will deliver at least three major half-day consultation events at different centres around the UK. We envisage these being held in London (South East/Midlands/S Wales), Manchester (North West/Yorkshire/N Wales/N Ireland) and Newcastle (North East/Scotland). Participants would be invited from a range of institutions and disciplinary constituencies, located within the respective regions.

Apart from organising events on a geographical basis we will hold two slightly smaller meetings with two key groups central to the current debate over ethical research: one focused on the biosciences/clinical research and the other with ESRC Centre and Programme Directors.

In addition to the three regional events plus additional meetings, we will interview a number of key stakeholders.

7. Final report

A draft of the Guidelines will be discussed at a meeting of the Strategic Forum for the Social Sciences, with the final Report provided to the ESRC on April 30 2004. This will be followed by a major Launch event in London for the new Guidelines.

September 2003