The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shenzhen

Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics

V4.0. April 12, 2020

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), experimental surveys, quasi-experimental surveys.
- either group or individual interviews.
- in-depth case study of the target participant(s).
- observation of human behavior 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* 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.

B. Who Should Apply For Review

B1. Survey and Behavioral Research Studies

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.

In cases of collaborative projects, if data were to be collected by members at the university, then an ethics application is required. However, if members at the university do not need to collect data, then an ethics application is not required.

The procedures to apply for ethics approval from the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* are explained below (Section F of this *Guidelines*).

Researchers should examine the nature of their research studies to determine if they need to obtain approval from other research ethics committees within CUHK-SZ.

B2. Course Projects

Pertaining to survey and behavioral research studies that are undertaken as part of a course:

a. If the data is *strictly used* for course learning and course requirement purposes, no ethics application is required.

b. If the *course instructor* plans to use the data for conference presentation and/or publication purposes subsequently, ethics application is required, with the course instructor as the applicant. All ethics guidelines will need to be adhered to by the applicant.

c. If the *student(s)* plan(s) to use the data for conference presentation and/or publication purposes subsequently, ethics application is required, with the student(s) as the applicant(s) and the course instructor as the supervisor. All ethics guidelines will need to be adhered to by the applicant and the supervisor.

d. In general, if no ethics approval has been obtained *prior* to data collection, data collected as part of a course *should not* be disseminated publicly, either as conference presentations, manuscript publications and/or in any other (public) formats.

e. Of note, doing a publishable research study is generally not a requirement for evaluating any course project conducted by students. A student has the discretion to either submit or not to submit an ethics approval application for a course project, except for PSYC5040 (in the context of Applied Psychology).

C. Types of Review

The Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee differentiates between two types of review: an expedited review and a full review. Expedited reviews require the completion of a *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Electronic Form* and submission of the electronic copy of the instruments to be used or a detailed description of these instruments. Researchers are not required to submit a full proposal of their research projects. If a research study does not qualify for an expedited review process, then a full review by the *Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee* has to be conducted. Researchers have to submit a full research proposal of their research studies along with the electronic Form to the Committee so that the research procedures and rationales could be closely examined. If necessary, the Committee may request additional materials from researchers to justify their research studies.

C1. Expedite Review

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

a. Participants are unable to give informed consent (e.g. children, mentally handicapped individuals). (Sections D1 and D3 of this *Guidelines*).

b. Excessive or inappropriate inducements, financial or otherwise, are provided to influence subjects' decision to participate. (Section D2 of this *Guidelines*).

c. Deception of participants is involved. (Section D4 of this *Guidelines*).

d. The study involves studying sensitive aspects of the participant's own behaviour such as illegal conduct, drug or alcohol use, and sexual conduct.

e. 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.

f. The study can induce undue psychological stress to participants.

g. Pain or discomfort that is higher than a reasonable level is likely to result from participating in the research study.

h. 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:

i. In 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

ii. 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

(a) if these sources are publicly available, or

(b) 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.

For research projects for courses or classes, an expedite review is granted to research studies meeting all the conditions above (a-f).

C2. Full Review

Projects that do not meet the requirements for an expedited review must go through a full review. In those cases, a researcher has to submit a completed electronic Form and 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. Specific to surveys whereby the participant is unable to provide consent in writing as well as online surveys, a statement to the effect of "If you proceed to work on this survey, it signifies that you have provided consent to take part in this study" should be included in the survey design.
- 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), the benefits to the individual or to others, a statement that participants are free to decline to participate, and significant factors that may be expected to influence their willingness to participate, including limitations in ensuring confidentiality.

- 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 study 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 research instruments (anonymous or non-anonymous) involving children, including primary school children. Children's informed assent is also needed. Assent means that the child shows some form of agreement to participate without necessarily comprehending the full significance of the research necessary to give informed consent.

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 Survey Ethics 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. Example of vulnerable populations are children under the age of 16, people with learning difficulties, clinical patients, people in custody and people engaged in illegal activities.

- 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 this *Guideline*).

- 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.

D5. Debriefing and Feedback

- Debriefing should typically occur after participation and feedback should be provided as soon as reasonably possible.
- Participants should, where possible, be given a full and clear explanation of procedures and the outcome of the research.
- Participants should be provided with information on how to contact the researcher or the research team. In addition, participants should be provided with contact information of the Ethics Committee and made aware they can contact they committee for a set period of time after the study is completed should they have questions or complaints.

E. Guidelines on Ensuring Confidentiality of Research and Personal Data

Research instruments 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

The researcher should fill out the electronic Form. The Form, together with other relevant documents (e.g., consent form, a copy of the research questionnaire, and research proposal), will be assigned to either one member (expedite review) or two (full review) members of the appropriate Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee. Specific to full review, the ethics committee chair may call for the full ethics panel to review, if needed. The Form should be written in English. For the other research documents, they need to be in the language that will be distributed to the participants. In the event that the research documents that will be distributed to the participants are in Chinese, English versions are encouraged to be sent along to the ethics committee for review.

For research projects requesting an expedited review, the researcher should provide clear and sufficient information in the electronic Form. Expedite review projects will be assigned to one member of the *Committee* who will make a judgement on whether the project in question qualified for an expedited review within one week. Note that the researcher should also submit a copy of the research questionnaire/instrument to be used, or a detailed description of these instruments. A representative of 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). Projects that qualify for an expedite review are automatically approved. Subsequently, the researcher obtains the research ethical code (REC) and can administer the study.

For projects that require a full review, the researcher should submit the electronic Form, research proposal to the Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee. 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. Projects that require full review will be assessed by at least two members of the committee who will review the project anonymously. Projects that approved are assigned a REC that enable the researcher to start data collection. Alternatively, for projects that are not approved, the researcher is expected to resubmit the application taking into account the recommendations of the two representatives of the committee.

F1. Research Studies Conducted by University Staff Members

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, the staff member should obtain the Form from the Secretary of the Survey and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee (please refer to Section H of this Guidelines for address), or download the Form from the website of the Committee.[1]

F2. Best Practices in Ethics Review

- The ethics committee is expected to be transparent in its assessment of research proposals, motivating its decisions exclusively on the basis of scientific standards and the principles summarized in this document.
- The committee is expected to facilitate the understanding and implementation of ethical procedures, providing researchers with clear feedback on how to improve their research protocols, and on the necessary steps needed to meet the ethical standards described in this document.

[1] Clinical research, epidemiological studies and studies using physiological measures should be reviewed using different standards and procedures. Please, contact the chairperson of ethics committee before submitting an application concerning these types of projects.

- Measures should be taken to avoid potential conflicts of interest between reviewers and researchers. Specifically, the ethics review process should be independent of the research process. Members of ethics committee should disclose potential personal and financial interests involved in the assessment of the research proposal (for instance, the committee member is co-author in the research).

- The ethics committee is expected to respect the intellectual property of the research proposals and forms submitted for review.

H. Inquiry

For inquiries, please contact the CUHK(SZ) Applied Psychology Institutional Review Board at psyethics@cuhk.edu.cn.