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Research Report

Forschungsethische Grundsätze und Prüfverfahren in den Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften

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RatSWD Output 9 (5)

Principles and Review Procedures of Research Ethics in the Social and Economic Sciences

Executive Summary

■ There is a need to act with regard to research ethics in the social and economic sciences in Germany. More recently, this realisation has led to a rise in ethics commissions at German social science and economics faculties, although this has been the result of individual and non-consolidated efforts. The following report is a first step towards a more comprehensive, interdisciplinary understanding of the principles of research ethics and review procedures in German social and economic research.

The German Data Forum's recommendations are aimed at initiating the emergence of a new infrastructure comprised of local ethics commissions, which are embedded into a harmonised comprehensive concept for ethical reflexivity in research and build on existing structures, codes and international developments.

The following document gives an introductory overview of the relevant dimensions of research ethics. As a basis for the following recommendations, the first part outlines central research ethical principles, which include (1) scientific quality and integrity of researchers; (2) avoidance of harm to research subjects and researchers, and (3) informed consent. These principles are a summation of existing ethics codes of academic organisations in social and economic research, other relevant guidelines (e.g. „Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice“) and legal regulations (e.g. data protection). Moreover, they incorporate insights taken from the academic and professional discourse on a national as well as international level.

1. The German Data Forum recommends promoting ethical reflexivity among researchers, scientific committees and project advisory boards. This includes assessing, balancing, addressing and documenting ethical issues during the complete lifecycle of a research project. The promotion of these competencies as well as an overarching culture of reflection and debate will require intensifying the exchange on ethical issues in scientific communities as well as the efforts to integrate research ethics into methods training, academic advisory and teaching.
2. The German Data Forum recommends the establishment of local ethics commissions at those social and economic research institutions expecting a continuous demand for formalised review procedures. Local ethics commissions will give researchers access to ethics review procedures in line with the requirements of their respective disciplines' methodologies. The evaluation processes should be optional, i.e. at the researcher's free disposal, and take into account the multi-paradigmatic approaches and the diversity of methods in the social and economic sciences. For institutions expecting a surge in ethics reviews, the German Data Forum recommends developing indicators that facilitate determining which projects require comprehensive review by a commission and in which cases well-documented self-assessment may be sufficient. In order to safeguard the quality of review procedures, the establishment of local ethics committees is only recommended if an institution expects a sufficient number of review requests (which will also secure procedural efficiency) and if the staff at its disposal has the necessary academic and methodological expertise to sit on the board.

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3. The German Data Forum recommends the establishment of supraregional ethics commissions to support and complement the activities of local ethics commissions in case of, for example, unusual, interdisciplinary, multi-sited or international research projects or research projects which do not have a local ethics commission at their disposal. Such ethics commissions could be set up by, for example, academic organisations, university clusters or research organisations (such as the Helmholtz Association of German Research Centres or the Leibniz Association).
 4. The German Data Forum recommends the establishment of a permanent forum for debate on research ethics. The forum may serve to discuss and develop sound solutions for pressing challenges in the context of, for example, new technologies, new digital realities and new forms of data (such as big data, social media and visual data). Such a forum may be jointly sponsored by several academic organisations under the umbrella of the NFDI, complement the activities of the German Ethics Council (formerly, National Ethics Council) and develop recommendations in line with the specific requirements of the social and economic sciences. The forum could also provide resources for training and development of the local ethics commissions' members.

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