CSA
Canadian Sociological Association
Société canadienne de sociologie

Statement of Professional Ethics

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Reference: Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans – TCPS 2 (2018)

In 2020, the Canadian Sociological Association's Policy, Ethics and Professional Concerns Subcommittee (PEPC) reviewed our Statement of Professional Ethics (version 2012) based on the updated TCPS-2) 2018.

The PEPC was concerned with ‘ethics creep’ and has thus limited the number of changes and additions to the current document to maintain its accessibility and integrity. Any member conducting research funded by the Tri-Council or who works at an institution that receives Tri-Council funding is required to abide by the ethics outlined in the TCPS-2. Our intention was not to replicate this document but to align our practices with theirs. All researchers are encouraged to consult the TCPS-2 for information on aspects related to the ethical practice of research.

Updated February 2021

1. Preamble

This Statement of Professional Ethics of the Canadian Sociological Association is intended to:

- serve as a set of issues to be considered in the design and implementation of research and in professional practice in sociology in Canada;
- to offer a resource in the professional training of students and faculty in this discipline;
- and to enter into dialogue with the communities we research, with other professions, and with university ethics boards and committees on sociological visions of professional ethics.

2. Implementation

The CSA recognizes that the practical implementation of ethical research and professional practices is a responsibility of researchers in association with such institutional ethics review bodies as departments, faculties, universities, colleges, community organizations, funding agencies, etc., as well as provincial and national federations of faculty members. This statement is meant, primarily, to inform members' ethical judgements rather than to impose on them an external set of standards. The role of the CSA is to serve as a forum for working through problems of research ethics and as a vehicle for educating about research issues. Its powers of enforcement are limited to moral persuasion, public discussion, the recommendation of resources for conflict resolution, and in extraordinary circumstances, censure. The strength of this statement and its binding force rest ultimately on active discussion, reflection, and continued use by sociologists.

The CSA also recognizes that many members receive research and scholarship support from one or more of the three major federal government agencies, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), and the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada (NSERC). In these cases, researchers and scholars are reminded that research funded by the three agencies should also abide by the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (2018) as a condition of receiving this financial support (see TCPS2, 2018 p. 3).

For those researchers and students who conduct research without the support of Tri-Council funds and who conduct their projects through the auspices of Canadian universities, the Tri-Council Policy Statement still applies.

In addition, researchers should comply with the privacy and protection of information legislation governing their home province (see TCPS2, 2018, p. 9). These laws vary and include issues related to confidentiality, safeguarding data, intellectual property, privacy and protection of participants (see TCPS2, 2018, p.9)

3. Acknowledgments

This Statement of Professional Ethics owes a great deal to the previous work of ethics committees of the British Sociological Association, the American Anthropological Association, the American Sociological Association, the Tri-Council Policy Statement-Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (2018), and of the CSA itself, as well as at least 3 decades of scholarly commentary since the first ethics codes were developed.

4. Organizing and Initiating Research

4.1 Codes of professional ethics arise from the need to protect vulnerable or subordinate populations from harm incurred, knowingly or unknowingly, by the intervention of researchers into their lives and cultures. Sociologists have an obligation to apply three core principles: respect for persons, concern for welfare, and justice. Respect for persons involves the moral obligation to protect and to respect participants' autonomy. Concern for welfare entails the protection and promotion of the participants' welfare and attempts to minimize risks associated with the research. Sociologists also have the responsibility to treat participants fairly and equitably.

4.2 Sociologists should take into account the perspective of the participant and consider the circumstances that shape the participant's life to design research ethically aligned with the core principles. Sociologists, when they carry out research, enter into personal and moral relationships with those they study, be they individuals, households, social groups, or corporate entities. Researchers should consult, where consistent with the research objectives, pre-existing organizations of potential research participants (e.g., trade unions, community groups, political or religious organizations, band councils, neighbourhood groups) or, in their absence, with key members, activists, and scholars from the participants' communities concerning the design, execution, and potential risks and benefits of the research project to them.

4.3 Researchers should guard against the uncritical promotion of research, which in design, execution, or results, furthers the power of some over others, especially when promoted for professional, therapeutic, or social control reasons. The researcher has a responsibility to approach the lives and cultures of those under study according to salient ethical norms.

4.4 Researchers have an obligation to critically examine presumptions, measures, and implicit norms used in research which serve to ignore or invalidate the experiences and understandings which research participants have of themselves.

4.5 Researchers should not exploit individuals or groups for personal gain and should recognize the debt incurred to the communities in which they work. Researchers should be sensitive to the possible exploitation of individuals and groups in the research process, and should endeavour to minimize the occurrence of such exploitation in the conduct of research.

4.6 Researchers have a responsibility to protect the integrity of the research process and should avoid undermining research inquiry through conceptualization or design which prejudges the direction of causality, presumes an outcome, or preordains findings by affirming its premises.

4.7 Researchers have a responsibility to represent fairly their own qualifications, as well as the time and funding requirements necessary for quality research.

4.8 Researchers should not accept grants, contracts, or research assignments that appear likely to require violation of the principles of this Statement.

4.9 Research involving human participants requires review and approval by a research ethics board before the research commences (TCPS2, 2010, p. 13). Secondary use of identifiable data, including data originally collected for non-research activities and that did not require REB approval at the time of collection, requires REB approval (section 5.5 TCPS 2010, pages 62-64).

4.10 Exceptions to this rule include research that relies exclusively on information that is:

I. publicly available through a mechanism set out by legislation or regulation and that is protected by law; or
II. in the public domain and the individuals to whom the information refers have no reasonable expectation of privacy (TCPS2, 2018, p. 15). Research that is non-intrusive, does not involve direct interaction between the researcher and individuals through the Internet, and where there is no expectation of privacy does not require REB review (TCPS2, 2018, p. 16).
III. REB review is required for public domain information when there is a reasonable expectation of privacy (TCPS2, 2018, p. 16), including online groups with restricted membership or sites' terms of use privacy expectations. REB review is not required for research involving the observation of people in public spaces, nor is it required for sociologists who are not working for Tri-Council funded institutions.

5. Protecting People in the Research Environment

5.1 Researchers should respect the rights of citizens to privacy, confidentiality and/or anonymity, and the right not to be studied. Researchers should make every effort to determine whether those providing information wish to remain anonymous or to receive recognition, and then respect their wishes.

5.2 Researchers should not misuse their positions for fraudulent purposes or as a pretext for gathering intelligence for any organization or government.

5.3 The protection of research participants does not absolve researchers of the responsibility of exposing physical, mental, sexual, or other abuse. Researchers should be aware of legal definitions of abuse and of the law pertaining to the reporting of abuse, should they encounter same while conducting research.

5.4 The principle of minimal risk to participants shall be primary. The definition of 'minimal risk' follows the TCPS2 definition: "defined as research in which the probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation in the research is no greater than those encountered by participants in those aspects of their everyday life that relate to the research" (TCPS2, 2018, p. 22).

5.5 Sociologists who conduct research with communities should be mindful to consider: "the perspective of the participant, the community and the individual members of the community (who may or may not be research participants)" (TCPS2, 2018, p.22).

5.6 Researchers and staff should be aware of risks to themselves in the research environment. Safety is a concern for all researchers, particularly students. (TCPS2, 2018, p. 25).

6. Informed Consent

6.1 Researchers should not expose participants to risk of personal harm. Informed consent should be obtained when the risks of research are greater than the risks of everyday life.

6.2 As far as possible, research should be based on the freely given and ongoing informed consent of those studied. This implies a responsibility to explain as needed, and in terms meaningful to participants, what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken, and how it is to be disseminated.

6.3 Researchers should inform research participants that they have the right not to answer particular questions or to withdraw without penalty at any point in the research process. This includes avoiding situations where undue influence or coercion may play a role during the recruitment of participants and threaten voluntariness (TCPS2, 2018, p.28).

6.4 When it comes to research with children and youth, "rather than an age-based approach to consent, TCPS 2 (2018) advocates an approach based on decision-making capacity as long as it does not conflict with any laws governing research participation" (TCPS2, 2018, p. 33). In some instances, consent from an authorized third party and the assent of the child are required at the beginning of a study because of the lacked capacity to decide of the child. Over time, when a child matures and has the decision-making capacity, sociologists should seek their autonomous consent. If a child was unable to assent (e.g. infants) at the beginning of study, the researcher should seek their assent once they can understand the purpose of the study.

6.5 Generally, signed consent forms are the norm in social research, but there are exceptions. While obtaining a signed consent form will often serve to verify informed consent, in the study of cross-cultural contexts, illegal activities or politically sensitive settings, it may be difficult, impossible, or culturally inappropriate to obtain knowledgeable and voluntary (let alone written) consent from everyone in the field setting. Sometimes the requirement that one obtain signed consent forms from everyone studied may violate anonymity and actually create risks for some groups of participants. Therefore, the signed consent form may be inadequate or inadvisable in certain circumstances, in which case the researcher should employ culturally appropriate methods to allow participants to make ongoing decisions to participate or to withdraw from the research process.

7. Research with Indigenous Peoples

7.1 Indigenous Peoples are recognized as First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples (The Constitution Act 1982, 35(2)). In keeping with the TCPS-2 (2018), researchers must engage in the practice of relationship building prior to engaging in research. During the research process, consultation with Indigenous nations, communities, organizations and/or governments must be met as a minimum standard here in Canada and abroad.

7.2 With the quickly shifting landscape in this area and in keeping with evolving best practices, researchers should make every effort to include Indigenous communities as partners from the start of the project going forward, and negotiate with Indigenous nations, communities and/or individuals concerning data ownership, including issues of collection, publication and storage of data (Global Indigenous Data Alliance 2019 CARE principles).

7.3 Where community REBs are in existence, researchers must seek approval for research through these community-based boards, before seeking ethics approval for research through university REBs.

8. Research Involving Partial Disclosure or Deception

8.1 Partial disclosure or deception maybe necessary for certain kinds of research in order to penetrate "official," "on-stage," or "on-the-record" presentations of reality. Deception should not be used where another methodology would accomplish the research objectives.

8.2 Participants should not be deceived if there is any reasonably anticipated risk to the participants or if the harm cannot be offset or the extent of the harm be reasonably predicted.

8.3 Deception is not acceptable if it would interfere with the subject's understanding of facts which might influence a decision to give informed consent.

8.4 Participants should not be deceived about the identities, qualifications, or affiliations of the researchers or sponsors of the research.

8.5 Whenever feasible, participants who have been deceived should be fully informed and debriefed in such a way that any harm caused can be discerned and corrected.

9. Safeguarding Data and Personal Information

9.1 Adequate security measures should be used to protect the data collected in the research project. This includes “physical, administrative and technical measures and should address the full life cycle of information” (TCPS2, 2018, p. 64) Data should be accessible only to the primary researcher and staff. Electronic files should be encrypted and password protected. Computers ought to be kept in a secure storage space. Provincial legislation regarding the storage of confidential data should be adhered to (TCPS2, 2018, p. 57). Data collected on the Internet or data kept on computers should be encrypted (TCPS2, 2018, p. 63).

9.2 Re-identification is a risk when researchers link data between two or more datasets or when data is collected over a small geographical range. Researchers should take care that no single participant can be identified in this way (TCPS2, 2018, p. 63).

9.3 There is no requirement that data be destroyed after a period of time. Policies regarding the archiving and sharing of data should be followed (TCPS2 2018, p. 63).

10. Dissemination of Findings

10.1 Researchers have an obligation to disseminate results openly except those likely to endanger research participants or to violate their anonymity or confidentiality.

10.2 If they do so desire, research participants have a right to be given feedback on the results and, where practicable, to be consulted over publications.

10.3 Researchers should consider carefully the social and political implications of the information they disseminate. They should strive to ensure that such information is well-understood, properly contextualized and responsibly utilized.

10.4 The researcher should not falsify or distort his or her findings or omit data which might significantly alter the conclusions. He or she should attempt to make explicit the methodological and theoretical bases of the study, including stating the limitations of the data.

10.5 Researchers are obliged to try to clarify any significant distortion made by a sponsor or client of the findings of a research project in which they have participated.

10.6 Research reports should disclose all sources of financial support for the research and any other sponsorship or special relationship with investigators.

10.7 Sociologists have a responsibility to speak out publicly, both individually and collectively, on issues about which they possess professional expertise. They have a professional responsibility to contribute to the formation of informational ground upon which public policy may be founded. They should be candid about their qualifications and should make clear the limits of their expertise. Particularly in their relations with the media, members should have regard for the reputation of the discipline and refrain from offering expert commentaries on material which as researchers they would regard as comprising inadequate or tendentious evidence.

11. Relations with Colleagues and the Discipline

11.1 The researcher should attempt to conduct research in such a way that his or her personal and professional behaviour will not jeopardize further research by self or others.

11.2 At the earliest possible stage of research, researchers should arrange mutually accepted explicit agreements among all research collaborators with respect to division of work, compensation, access to data, rights of authorship and other rights and responsibilities.

11.3 When conducting multijurisdictional, multidisciplinary and/or international research, researchers should adhere to the legislation of the country and/or organizations they work with. A review of research protocol by the primary researcher's REB, usually the university that employs the principle investigator, should be obtained (TCPS2, 2018, p. 99-106) in addition to the ethical review of the appropriate international or local organization.

11.4 A university that has established an REB may approve alternative review models for research involving multiple REBs and/or institutions. The university remains responsible for the ethical acceptability and ethical conduct of research undertaken within its jurisdiction regardless of where the research is conducted. The ethics review of research involving multiple institutions should reflect flexibility and efficiency and prevents unnecessary duplication of review without compromising the protection of participants.

11.5 Researchers should acknowledge all persons who contribute to their research and to their publications.

11.6 Attribution and ordering on authorship and acknowledgements should accurately reflect the contributions of all main participants in both research and writing processes, including students.

11.7 Researchers should disclose all real, potential and perceived conflicts of interest to Research Ethics Boards, research participants, as well as any institutional conflicts of interest or community conflicts of interest of which they are aware that may have an impact on their research (TCPS2, 2018, p. 96).

11.8 Data and material taken verbatim from another person's published or unpublished written or electronic work should be explicitly identified and referenced to its author.

11.9 Citations to ideas developed in the written work of others, even if not quoted verbatim, should not be knowingly omitted.

11.10 Evaluations of colleagues, students, and their work for employment or publication should be based only on professional criteria. In reviewing the work of others, members should avoid conflicts of interest. They should also normally avoid participating in review procedures where they have a close positive or negative connection with those under review.

11.11 Members should supply requested references promptly and ensure that these are full, fair, and adequately considered. Within the legal limit, they should not disclose personal information which is not directly relevant to the position in question without the subject's explicit and prior consent.

11.12 The content of evaluations should be made available to the individual evaluated, with the right of reply ensured.

11.13 Journal editors should provide decisions to authors of submitted manuscripts within a reasonable time frame. An editor's commitment to publish an essay should be binding on the journal and it should then be published expeditiously.

12. Faculty Appointments

12.1 The criteria used in evaluating potential appointees should be universalistic and non-discriminatory.

12.2 Departments should preclude and redress discrimination on the basis of sex, marital status, colour, race, ancestry, social class, political convictions, religion, ethnic background, place of origin, sexual orientation, age, physical/mental disability, or other criteria irrelevant to academic performance.

12.3 Positions should be advertised widely.

12.4 All short-listed candidates for positions should be interviewed.

12.5 The short list of candidates for positions should not be finalized until after the closing date for applications.

12.6 The positions that are filled should be the positions that were advertised.

12.7 Appointment procedures at all stages should attempt to ensure that power is neither abused, nor observed or perceived to be abused.

12.8 The selection process should be made as public as possible within the department.

12.9 All aspects of the selection process should be detailed, clear, precise, understood, and in writing.

12.10 Information on applicants and the selection process should be transparent and widely accessible within the department.

12.11 The selection process should be as democratic as possible.

12.12 Participation in the selection process should be from as broad as possible a cross-section of the department, including students, and researchers with relevant research expertise.

12.13 Participation in the final decision of the selection process should be organized in as non-elitist a manner as possible.

12.14 Participants in the selection process have an obligation to make known any conflicts of interests or biases that would impede objective decision-making.

13. Relations with Students

13.1 The CAUT Policy Statements with respect to teaching are endorsed.

13.2 Students should be accepted into programs in ways precluding and redressing discrimination on the basis of sex, marital status, colour, social class, race, citizenship/immigration status, political convictions, religion, ethnic background, national origin, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, or other criteria irrelevant to academic performance.

13.3 Students are entitled to adequate information in good time about the content of courses, program choices, modes of assessment, and appeals procedures. They are also entitled to prompt and fair evaluation of their work, and to the keeping of full and proper records of their progress, within the period defined by the institution.

13.4 Members should support students' studies in a diligent manner by regular attendance when teaching and by being available for consultation by students.

13.5 Members have a duty to minimize discriminatory practices which might detract from equality of educational opportunity; this applies particularly to racial, sexual, homophobic, and other such harassment, including verbal abuse. They have a duty to be cognizant of the disciplinary codes existing in their institutions for dealing with students who insult or intimidate others.

13.6 Members should not allow intellectual differences or personal animosities among colleagues to impinge on students' relationships with those colleagues.

13.7 At the member’s discretion, there is a duty to assist both undergraduate and graduate students in their attempts to find employment and seek financial support for their studies and/or research through scholarships, fellowships, etc. This will normally involve the writing of references and, in the case of graduate students, may involve introducing students into appropriate networks.

13.8 Members should not deceive or coerce students into serving as research participants. They should not underpay, or use students simply as cheap or unpaid labour in the conduct of research. They should not represent the work of students as their own, and should credit students with co-/authorship when justified.

13.9 Members should respect the confidentiality of personal information about students. They have a duty to ensure that any records are secure and that access to them is restricted.

13.10 The supervisory relationship is particularly crucial to the successful completion of graduate studies. Members who are supervising graduate students should be aware that many graduate students encounter difficulties in balancing their rights and responsibilities with those of their supervisors. Hence, at the earliest possible stage, supervisors and graduate students should arrange mutually acceptable, explicit agreements with respect to anticipated progress, topic of research, timelines, professionalization responsibilities, etc. Such agreement should reinforce the partnership aspect of graduate studies - that is, the mutual obligations and expectations of graduate students and their supervisors.

14. Harassment and Exploitative Relations

14.1 Sexual, racial, homophobic, and other such harassment are abuses of power which negate both the principle of equal opportunities and the possibilities of a good working environment.

14.2 Members thus have a duty to refrain from them and to actively oppose such behaviour by others.

14.3 Members should not use the inequalities of power which characterize many working relationships including those between teachers and undergraduate, graduate, and research students, to obtain personal, sexual, economic, religious, professional, or other advantages.

14.4 Members should be aware that such inequalities of power pertain not only in coercive but also in consensual relationships. They should take care that personal or sexual relationships entered into at work on a consensual and reciprocal basis do not exploit those inequalities of power, and do not disadvantage or unfairly advantage the less powerful.

14.5 The CAUT Policy Statement on “Freedom from Harassment” is recommended as a guideline.

15. Relations with Institutions

Ethics policies should not be employed by institutional review committees to protect governments, corporations, churches, universities, or other institutions from critical or controversial research, nor should they be used to exert a chilling effect upon academic freedom.

16. Recommendations

This Statement of Professional Ethics should be posted on the CSA website and made widely available to CSA members