

MILANO ADVANCED SEMINAR

Upholding Research and Professional Standards. Principles adapted from the European Commission and the Social Science Research Council (U.S.)

Do no harm

It should be an overriding aim of socio-economic research that the results should benefit society, either directly or by generally improving human knowledge and understanding. It follows from this that in the conduct of the research, researchers should aim to avoid or minimize social harm to groups and individuals. With this in mind, socio-economic researchers and their funders should reflect on the consequences of participation in the research for all research subjects and stakeholders.

Research should be designed responsibly in order to ensure that the methodology is appropriate, that no group is unreasonably excluded and that harm is minimized. Participants should not be worse off as a result of their involvement in the research. Research should also be designed in order to maximize its utility and relevance for the benefit of society.

Wherever possible, and providing that this does not conflict with other ethical or scientific considerations, representatives of the social groups under study should be actively involved in the research.

In particular, researchers should endeavor to:

1. Ensure that participation in research is voluntary, on the basis of informed consent, taking account of the specific requirements of differing types of quantitative and qualitative research
2. Take special care to protect the interests of children, the mentally impaired, the elderly and other vulnerable groups
3. Ensure that the views of all relevant stakeholders are taken into account where this does not conflict with other ethical or scientific principles
4. Ensure that research participants are protected from undue intrusion, distress, indignity, physical discomfort, personal embarrassment or psychological harm
5. Ensure that the research process does not involve unwarranted material gain or loss for any participant
6. Ensure that research results are disseminated in a manner that makes them accessible to the relevant social stakeholders

7. Ensure that research is commissioned and conducted with respect for all groups in society regardless of race, ethnicity, religion and culture, and with respect for and awareness of gender or other significant social differences
8. Avoid harassment or discrimination against research assistants, trainees or other colleagues and minimize any safety risks.

Standards in Research and Professional Conduct

Researchers have a responsibility to take account of all relevant evidence and present it without omission, misrepresentation or deception. This means making sure that the selection and formulation of research questions, and the conceptualization or design of research undertakings, does not predetermine an outcome, and does not exclude unwanted findings from the outset. Data and information must not knowingly be fabricated, or manipulated in a way that might lead to distortion.

Integrity requires researchers to strive to ensure that research findings are reported by themselves, the contractor or the funding agency truthfully, accurately and comprehensively. This includes the distribution and publication of information about their research through the popular media. In order to avoid misinterpretation of findings and misunderstandings, researchers have a duty to communicate their results in as clear a manner as possible.

However strongly the goal of objectivity is pursued, no researcher can approach a subject entirely without preconceptions and any research will undoubtedly be colored by the individual approach of the researcher. It is therefore also the responsibility of researchers to balance the need for rigor and validity with a reflexive awareness of the impact of their own personal values on the research.

Finally, integrity means that researchers primarily serve scholarly and public interests. Economic gain or material advantage should not override scholarly, public or ethical considerations.

1. Ensure factual accuracy and avoid misrepresentation, fabrication, suppression or misinterpretation of data
2. Take account of the work of colleagues, including research that challenges their own results, and acknowledge fully any debts to previous research as a source of knowledge, data, concepts and methodology
3. Critically question authorities and assumptions to make sure that the selection and formulation of research questions, and the conceptualization or design of research undertakings, do not predetermine an outcome, and do not exclude unwanted findings from the outset

4. Ensure the use of appropriate methodologies and the availability of the appropriate skills and qualifications in the research team
5. Demonstrate an awareness of the limitations of the research, including the ways in which the characteristics or values of the researchers may have influenced the research process and outcomes, and report fully on any methodologies used and results obtained (for instance when reporting survey results, mentioning the date, the sample size, the number of non-responses and the probability of error)
6. Declare any conflict of interest that may arise in the research funding or design, or in the scientific evaluation of proposals or peer review of colleagues' work
7. Report their qualifications and competences accurately and truthfully to contractors and other interested parties, declare the limitations of their own knowledge and experience when invited to review, referee or evaluate the work of colleagues, and avoid taking on work they are not qualified to carry out
8. Ensure methodology and findings are open for discussion and full peer review
9. Ensure that research findings are reported by themselves, the contractor or the funding agency truthfully, accurately, comprehensively and without distortion. In order to avoid misinterpretation of findings and misunderstandings, researchers have a duty to seek the greatest possible clarity of language when imparting research results
10. Ensure that research results are disseminated responsibly and in language that is appropriate and accessible to the target groups for whom the research results are relevant
11. Avoid professional behavior likely to bring the socio-economic research community into disrepute
12. Ensure fair and open recruitment and promotion, equality of opportunity and appropriate working conditions for research assistants whom they manage, including interns
13. Honor their contractual obligations to funders and employers
14. Declare the source of funding in any communications about the research.

Integrity of Sources: Intellectual Property, Data Protection, and Attribution

Researchers in socio-economic studies are obliged to protect personal data, ie information on identifiable individuals. In order to prevent misuse of data, data are to be stored properly and adequately (eg, by storing information through which individuals can be identified, separately from the remaining research material). Particular caution is necessary in this context with regard to the risks posed by electronic data processing and data transfer.

Researchers should respect the anonymity, privacy and confidentiality of individuals participating in the research, and ensure that the presentation of data and findings does not allow the identity of individuals participating in a study, or informants, to be disclosed or inferred. Researchers should also ensure that this is the case in the presentation of findings by contractors, funding agencies or colleagues. In cases where disclosure of the identity of a subject (whether an individual or an organization) is central and relevant to the research such confidentiality cannot always be guaranteed. In such cases the problem should be addressed in open discussion with research subjects, with the aim of obtaining informed consent to any disclosure.

Before embarking on the collection of any personal data, researchers should take into account the duties and conditions of processing, make an analysis of the processing envisaged, identify the operations that will be involved and the level of sensitivity of the data, in order to assess the lawfulness of the exercise.

Wherever practicable, intellectual property rights should be explicitly addressed in contracts covering the conduct of socio-economic research, whether these are funding contracts, partnership agreements or employment contracts.

The following questions and principles should be taken into account when conducting socio-economic research:

1. Recognizing the relevance of intellectual property rights to socio-economic research
2. Taking due account of the fact that (especially in an online environment and/or international co-operations) several national laws might be applicable that differ substantially from the regulations in the researcher's home country
3. Paying due respect to the fact that material used in socio-economic research is predominantly protected by intellectual property rights such as copyright, database and software protection
4. Ascertaining which acts within typical research conduct are unacceptable without (statutory or contractual) permission due to rights being reserved for the author under intellectual property legislation (as named above)

5. Realizing how exceptions/exemptions/limitations supersede individual permission for certain acts of socio-economic research under certain conditions
6. Understanding how to use licenses and assignments of rights when creating or using material protected as intellectual property
7. Taking into account how employment contracts might affect intellectual property
8. Realizing the consequences of copyright infringements.

In order to comply with intellectual property law, socio-economic researchers should:

1. Find out to what extent questions of intellectual property rights (copyright, database and software protection) are concerned in the particular research activity
2. Examine which countries' laws apply, especially in international co-operations and when using the Internet
3. Assume that any material created or used in socio-economic research might be intellectual property and consider protection before using it
4. Realize that many ways of using protected material – such as reproduction by down-/upload or by paper/digital copies, publication, making material available on the Internet, alteration (eg, for online format etc.) – are generally reserved for a rightsholder, and find out when permission is therefore (in principle) required
5. When relying on legal permission (*like the exceptions for quotation, research or 'fair use'*) for any particular conduct, consider carefully the respective extent and conditions
6. If a planned activity is not clearly covered by statutory permissions (for example quotation rights) identify the rightsholder and conclude authorizing contracts (transfer/assignment of rights/license agreements). Ascertain that the permission covers explicitly all relevant aspects – among them the description of type, extent, duration, environment (such as online) of the intended use, any preparatory or subsequent acts, rights involved, responsibility for possible infringements, remuneration etc.
7. Where several parties are involved (researchers, assistants, funding parties, staff/employees, enterprises, universities) ensure explicit consensus among parties in advance, about rights matching the intended use.