

Ethical assessment of survey on questionable research practices (part of the research project “Practices, Perceptions, and Patterns of Research Integrity”)

Background

On September 22, 2018 Vice-Dean for Research and Talent Per Baltzer Overgaard, School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University set up an ad hoc Research Ethics Committee to conduct an ethical assessment of a survey questionable research practices to be used in a research project led by Professor Jesper W. Schneider from the The Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy at Aarhus University. The members of the committee were Professor Julia Nafziger, Department of Economics and Business Economics, Aarhus University, Professor Vibeke Asmussen Frank, Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Aarhus University, and Professor Kim Mannemar Sønderskov (chairman), Department of Political Science, Aarhus University (See Appendix 1).

The committee received the application for the ethical assessment on September 25, 2018. The application contained 1) A description of the aim of the survey, 2) A description of the questionnaire, 3) Ethical considerations, 4) Appendix #1: Email invitation, and 5) Appendix #2: Survey instrument. Based on the material, the committee asked of the applicant to clarify 10 issues in the application. The questions are attached to this assessment (See Appendix 2). The committee received the applicant's answers to these questions on October 1, 2018, along with a revised version of the application. The committee found that all questions were answered in full.

Assessment

The questionnaire contains elements of a sensitive nature, but answering these questions in itself should not lead to discomfort or any other harm for the study objects in the committee's assessment. Moreover, the strategy for data storage and dissemination of the results minimizes the possibility that any study participant should be harmed after the data collection phase. In conclusion, the committee finds that that the survey instrument—including the invitation letter, the information to the participants, the questionnaire, the data storage strategy, and the proposed plan for analysis and dissemination of the findings—does not give rise to ethical concerns in relation to potential adverse impacts on individual study subjects.

On behalf of the committee,



Kim Mannemar Sønderskov
Chairman

Department of Political
Science

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Page 1/1



**Research Ethics Committee at School of Business and Social Sciences,
Aarhus University**

An ad hoc Research Ethics Committee has been formed at School of Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, in my capacity as Vice-Dean for Research and in accordance with international policy on research involving human participants and national and EU regulations on personal data.

The ad hoc Research Ethics Committee consists of the following faculty members:

- Professor Kim Mannemar Sønderskov, Chairman, Department of Political Science
- Professor Julia Nafziger, Department of Economics and Business Economics
- Professor Vibeke Asmussen Frank, Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences

It is the responsibility of the committee to assess whether a research project is carried out in a responsible manner from a research ethical point of view, taking into account the protection of rights, safety and wellbeing of trial subjects participating in the research project in question.

Kind regards,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Per Baltzer Overgaard'.

Per Baltzer Overgaard
Vice-Dean for Research

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Page 1/1

Regarding Ethical assessment of survey instrument on questionable research practices

On September 22, 2018 Vice-Dean for Research and Talent Per Baltzer Overgaard, Aarhus University set up an ad hoc committee to conduct an ethical assessment of a survey instrument on questionable research practices to be used in a research project led by Professor Jesper W. Schneider from the The Danish Centre for Studies in Research and Research Policy at Aarhus University. The members of the committee were Professor Julia Nafziger, Department of Economics, Aarhus University, Professor Vibeke Asmussen Frank, Department of Psychology, Aarhus University, and Professor Kim Mannemar Sønderskov (chairman), Department of Political Science, Aarhus University.

The application for the ethical assessment (dated September 28 2018) was received on Tuesday September 25, 2018. The application contained 1) A description of the aim of the survey, 2) A description of the questionnaire, 3) Ethical considerations, 4) Appendix #1: Email invitation, and 5) Appendix #2: Survey instrument.

Before giving our final ethical assessment, we have a set of questions that we would like the applicant to answer. The questions may give rise to a revision of the application and/or the survey material, and in that case, we will assess the revised application.

Questions:

- 1) The application asks for an ethical *approval* of the survey instrument. In the ad hoc committee's understanding, we can ethically *assess*, but not approve, the survey. Should the application and the information to the participants read "assessment" instead of approval then?
- 2) Has the consent form/participant information (i.e., the invitation email/first page of the survey) been approved by AU's legal office? In our understanding, the legal office requires to approve consent forms from AU if personal or sensitive information is processed. In the bottom of the letter, we have inserted our understanding of what such a consent form/participant information (with respect to the processing of data) can look like.

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Page 1/2

- 3) Related to the previous point: Should the invitation email/participant information explain how a participant can withdraw consent, that withdrawal of consent implies that the survey data will be deleted, and that consent cannot be withdrawn once the participants is anonymized? Again, we refer to the bottom of this letter.
- 4) In the invitation email/participant information, should it be said that sensitive information will be collected? So far this is only stated on the first page of the survey.
- 5) Given that the data will only be anonymized in the post-analysis phase, would it be more correct to write "we guarantee confidentiality" instead of "we guarantee anonymity" on the first page of the survey?
- 6) In the post-analysis phase, when the data are to be completely anonymized, will information that in combination with other information could lead to identification (e.g. field of research, gender and PhD year) be removed or recoded into broader categories to avoid identification?
- 7) Will the preregistration contain details on the project's incidental findings policy?
- 8) Should the participant information state more explicitly that the survey has only been assessed by an ethical committee in Denmark, and not in all participating countries?
- 9) Do the procedures for storage of personal data live up to the standards for data storage of personal data set by the Danish Data Protection Agency? And should the participant information contain a link to these standards and/or AU's policy on data protection?
- 10) Related to several of the points above: The first page of the survey and the invitation email did sometimes not contain the same info. Should you make the invitation email the "participant info" and refer to this on the first page of the survey, where people just give consent?

About the consent form/participant information:

The participant info should describe in more detail what kind of data is collected and why. Specifically, it should be specified which type of personal data is collected for which purpose and which treatment is used (e.g. collection, registration, transmissions etc.) and when it is deleted/anonymized. Suggestion (standard text in accordance with the consent form from the legal office): „This study collects normal personal information. Specifically, we [insert treatment: e.g. collect, process, keep etc.] information in form of [insert data type e.g. contact information, economic situation, CV etc.] and link it to a personal identifier, such as [name, CPR, email, ...]. The data is collected for [insert purpose of use]. Further, we process sensitive personal information in form of [insert data type; e.g. political, philosophical or religious orientation, ethnicity, genetical data, union memberships, sexual orientation, biometric data, health information etc.]. The information is collected for [insert purpose]. We keep your personal data until [insert date; if you cannot give a point in time say why and explain the criterion for when the data will be / can be anonymized]."

Kind regards,
Julia Nafziger, Vibeke Asmussen Frank, Kim Mannemar Sønderskov