

Sociology Ethical Approval and Risk Assessment

The Sociology Ethics Committee's remit is to ensure that research conducted in the Department conforms (a) with the ethical standards established by the discipline's professional bodies and in the academic profession as a whole, and (b) with legal provisions and responsibilities, especially those governing universities. The Sociology Ethical Approval and Risk Assessment Form must be completed and approved before research is undertaken (and for undergraduate and MPhil courses, also before a deadline to be advised on each relevant course).

The Committee acts as a filter and a monitor: if it is satisfied that a project does not raise any serious ethical issues, and that risks have been thoughtfully assessed, minimised where appropriate and are not unacceptably high, it will approve it, perhaps after asking for specific changes or clarification. It is, however, possible, and perfectly normal, that legitimate doctoral or post-doctoral research raises serious ethical issues, and in those cases the project will be passed to a University Ethics Committee which operates in accordance with relevant national procedures, to ensure that the corresponding safeguards are in place.

The Sociology Ethics Committee advises undergraduates and MPhil students not normally to undertake fieldwork or surveys which raise ethical issues of the kind which require University Ethics Committee approval.

Research Summary

In providing a summary of your research, please observe a 500-word limit – in the case of undergraduate and MPhil projects you should only in exceptional cases write more than 250 words.

Please take account of the following questions and provide details if the answer to any of them is 'yes':

1. Does your project involve working with young people under the age of 18? (If so, explain how you will approach and select them and what sort of questions you will be asking them. You will need formal clearance for this work from a University Ethics Committee.)

2. Does your project involve working with vulnerable groups, such as those suffering from a physical or mental illness or those who have suffered a recent trauma?
3. Does your project require you to ask people questions concerning intimate details about their own personal lives or those of people close to them – for example about bereavement, sexual behaviour, family troubles, violence, alcoholism, or drugs?
4. Are you intending to request sensitive information which is likely to cause an emotional reaction or that requires particular measures to protect the confidentiality of your participants?
5. Will you be dealing with an organization? If so, how will you obtain the approval of a representative of the organization? (If this is not necessary or advisable, please explain.)

Risk Assessment

Please note that we are not suggesting that research should be risk-free. Rather, experience has shown that careful planning can often suggest ways in which risks can be reduced. Note that many of the risks that you may encounter are not specific to the research but may be associated with related to activities such as travel in unfamiliar environments.

The form can be downloaded from the Sociology Undergraduate Website:
<http://www.sociology.cam.ac.uk/undergraduates/current-undergraduates/part-iib>