

ESRC Consultation Document - Review of the ESRC Research Ethics Framework (2009)

Information on Respondent

Name	Professor Richard Jenkins	
Organisation	British Sociological Association	
Position & Title	BSA Trustee and Council Member	
Are you responding officially for your organisation		Y

Key Issues

1. Have there been any key developments in the last three years within social science, or within research more generally, that need to be more explicitly addressed within the Research Ethics Framework?	Y
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Comments on this section:

(1) The most obvious change has been the massive expansion in on-line research – by which we mean research using the Internet to gather data, and research about ‘what goes on’ on the Internet. The ESRC’s REF needs explicitly to recognise that existing ethical standards apply to on-line research, and to explore new ethical concerns - about privacy, informed consent, vulnerability and safety, and intellectual property, in particular - that it may throw up. There is a lack of clarity about these issues and a need for a specific in-depth review before finalising the new text of the REF.

(2) The use of digital photography and video may also throw up its own, new, ethical concerns, not least with respect to image manipulation, image storage and image transmission. These issues also need detailed clarification.

(3) Finally, data storage is now, for the overwhelming majority of researchers, digitised. The ethical implications of this with respect to security and privacy, and the kinds of undertakings that are routinely given to research subjects, also need to be explored in detail.

There are other key issues that have surfaced within debates about research ethics that are not necessarily the result of new developments in research.

In particular, researcher safety, and the responsibilities in this respect of institutions and principal investigators, should be highlighted in any version of the REF. This means being 'risk aware', rather than 'risk averse', in the planning of research, especially where it is to be conducted by research students or research officers. The institutional management of risk to researchers appears to be poor across the HE sector.

It would be helpful if ESRC could provide guidance about how to present for informed consent the issue of making data available for secondary analysis. Archiving of qualitative data may be being undermined because Research Ethics Panels and applicants are not aware they should be asking that data be made available for secondary analysis and that consent should explicitly be sought for this.

Finally, given current national debates about research integrity, we feel that ESRC should at least consider widening the scope of its guidelines to include integrity issues as well as ethical concerns. In other words, a broad, integrated Research Governance framework might be what is required. This should include an obligation on universities to support individuals in pursuing research, as well as the obligations currently placed on individuals with respect to how they conduct research.

2. In your experience, is all social science research being reviewed on a consistent basis or is ESRC funded or submitted research treated differently? **Y**

Comments on this section:

The one exception that might be highlighted is that social science research in NHS or social care settings is, of course, subject to ethics approval procedures external to HEIs.

3. Are you broadly content that the delegated authorities and management procedures associated with research ethics within ROs/ Universities are clear and that delegation and decision making is properly, diligently and equitably exercised? **Y**

You may wish to distinguish where your comments relate to your observations on UK HEIs/ROs as a whole and your own particular institution.

Comments on this section:

It is important that ESRC continues to devolve responsibility for ethics approval to HEIs, within a context of conformity with Council REF requirements. There is an argument for less formal, detailed specification of process by ESRC - with respect to the membership and procedures of RECs, for example - in order to encourage and allow HEIs to develop, and own, their own robust ethical approval systems.

Signature R Jenkins

Date 26 February 2009

Closing Date for Comments: 27 February 2009
Please return to: ethics@esrc.ac.uk