

Ethical Principles and Scientific Standards for Social Work Research Research Ethics Code of the DGSA¹

Preamble

Social Work as a *profession* aims to promote social change, social development and social cohesion as well as the empowerment and liberation of people. It is based on principles of social justice, human rights, shared responsibility and respect for diversity.² The professional practice of social work is oriented towards the greatest possible addressee involvement.

Research in social work is necessary in order to empirically accompany and fund the further development of the profession and discipline of social work. In a systematic and verifiable manner, it generates knowledge about the lived conditions and perspectives of (potential) addressees, the knowledge and actions of social work professionals and managers, other groups of people involved (e.g. relatives or volunteers), interactions and interventions, concepts and programmes, organizations and social contexts of social work.

Research in social work has a critical potential insofar as it breaks with common sense assumptions, reveals the contingency of action and questions existing conditions. In this sense, it is also capable of contributing to the aforementioned goals and principles of social work. The research principles are also oriented towards those of the profession of social work. The professional practice as well as research in social work are essentially subject to the applicable legal regulations.

research pursues both fundamental and application-oriented questions. It also includes research by social work practitioners and addressees as well as in educational research. In accordance with their methodological positioning, studies are oriented towards different quality criteria or standards and thus select different methodological approaches. Each study therefore poses specific research-ethical questions that need to be reflected upon during the conception and throughout the entire research process. Tensions can arise between ethical principles, which can lead to ethical dilemmas. They should be explored carefully in relation to the research setting and should be resolved by means of plausible prioritisation.

The present Research Ethics Code of the German Association of Social Work (DGSA) establishes central scientific standards and principles of research ethics for research in social work. It aims to provide researchers with a guiding framework to which they ought to commit themselves in devising and conducting their study. It intends to stimulate reflections on research ethics, evaluations and learning processes and to support well-founded decisions, which must always be taken in relation to the project

¹ The Research Ethics Code of the DGSA (German Association of Social Work) was developed in the years 2019 and 2020 under participation of many actors. In particular, the participants of the research section and the ethics expert group, the members of the Ethics Review Committee and the speakers of the DGSA sections and expert groups contributed their expertise. The process was coordinated by the DGSA Executive Committee.

² This understanding of social work and its foundations corresponds to the Global Definition of Social Work as adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in July 2014 (IFSW/IASSW 2014).

and made as transparent as possible. In this sense, the Research Ethics Code addresses researchers in different positions and contexts as well as funding agencies, university administrations, students and persons who participate in studies in different ways or are affected by the implementation of a study.

The Research Ethics Code also forms the working basis of the Ethics Review Committee of the DGSA, which issues research ethics reports upon request if these are required for the application of a research project or research-related publications.³ The Committee examines whether the respective application meets minimum standards of research ethics or whether there are any concerns. The examination of research projects by the Ethics Review Committee does not relieve researchers from the need to be sensitive to ethical conflicts that arise during the research process and to deal with them appropriately. Advice from colleagues can support the discussion of ethical questions.⁴

1. Fundamental conditions for research

The freedom of research anchored in the [Federal German] constitution is the prerequisite for scientific practice. It is both challenged and limited by human dignity and fundamental rights. The fundamental conditions for any research are based on this relationship.

The fundamental conditions not only determine whether and how disciplinary and professional knowledge can be generated, they also contribute to the realization of research practice in accordance with scientific standards⁵ and ethical principles.

Programmes of research funding should take into account the specifics of research in social work. This means, among others, that they should be receptive to a broad range of topics and allow different methodological/methodical approaches. Participation of and cooperation with other actors should be possible within the framework of the research, as is interdisciplinary cooperation, but without imposing the form of the cooperation or a specific procedure. The resources made available within the framework of research funding should be appropriate for the specific research projects being funded.

The fundamental conditions for research in social work should be designed in such a way that new insights and discoveries are possible within the chosen methodological framework of a study. In this context, modifications during the research process are left open, for example with regard to research interests, methodical procedures as well as formats and timing of the publication of (interim) results, which stem from the specifics of the respective research field, necessary negotiation processes with the various actors involved and reflection on ethical issues.

In the organizations and institutions where researchers are employed, the existing structures will need to enable studies to be carried out in accordance with scientific standards and research-ethical principles.⁶ All measures and structures of research funding should be based on a broad understanding of research that does not reduce it to externally funded research. Precautions are to be taken with regard to legal problems and possible damage to researchers which may become relevant in the course of a

³ <https://www.dgsa.de/ueber-uns/forschungsethik-kommission/>

⁴ One means to achieve this is the DGSA's research ethics forum, in which researchers can exchange views on practical and ethical questions.

⁵ See in particular German Research Foundation (DFG) (2019): Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice. Code. Bonn (https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/principles_dfg_funding/good_scientific_practice/ [18.11.2020])

⁶ This applies, for example, to the organization of working conditions, leave of absence or reductions of teaching load for research and research-supporting structures in the administration.

study. Technical measures need also be taken to ensure the secure storage and processing of personal data and confidential information.

2. Good research practice

Researchers ought to use the constitutionally granted freedom of research responsibly.⁷

The general principles of scientific work apply to social work research, as formulated in particular in the guidelines of the German Research Foundation (DFG), in the respective applicable version⁸.

Self-reflection with regard to one's own role in research, one's own interests, possible biases and interdependencies is as much an essential part of scientific practice as the exchange with colleagues about approaches, findings, practical and ethical questions and dilemmas.

3. Rights of research participants⁹

The rights to freedom, participation, information and protection of the research participants must be considered. These rights may be in tension with one another.

Studying lived reality – especially that of marginalized or stigmatized people or people in vulnerable and dependent situations – is an important task of social work research. Researchers should reflect on the social, political and organizational contexts of the research, the relationships in the social systems being researched and their own positioning and be aware of conflicts and power relations. Subject to reflection should also be whether and to what extent research itself contributes to labelling and stigmatization, as well as how it might reproduce existing power relations.¹⁰ Irrespective of the subject of the study, this reflection should adopt a diversity resp. intersectional perspective.

Research is based on the principles of minimal risk and minimal burden (3.1), participation (3.2) and informed consent (3.3).¹¹ First, the extent to which data collection is necessary to generate knowledge must be examined. Regarding the right to informational self-determination, only as much data should be collected as is necessary for the research objective. Anonymisation and pseudonymisation must be carefully ensured to the extent possible. This also applies to the institutions and organizations being involved. The research participants must be informed about the limits of the anonymisation of their data. Researchers must be familiar with the legal framework of the field.¹² They must be conscious of the fact that research may cause problems for the research participants or other parties involved, must show responsibility in such cases, and arrange appropriate offers of support.

⁷ German Research Foundation (DFG) (2019): Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice. Code. Bonn (https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/principles_dfg_funding/good_scientific_practice/ [28.03.2020])

⁸ German Research Foundation (DFG) (2019): Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice. Code. Bonn (https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/principles_dfg_funding/good_scientific_practice/ [28.03.2020])

⁹ The term “research participants” is used both here and in the following to refer to the actors who are researched within a study, i.e. who are interviewed or subject to participatory observation, and who may themselves participate further in shaping the research process (e.g. within participatory research). In different research traditions and approaches, different terms are used to designate research participants (e.g. researchees, research subjects, persons under investigation, respondents, co-researchers), which also imply different views of their role.

¹⁰ This factor ought to be reflected upon, for example, with respect to cognitive interest, methodological approach, sampling/random samples, the form of addressing or not addressing potential participants/groups, or the use of concepts and categories.

¹¹ The order of the corresponding chapters is based on the temporal logic of the research process.

¹² Concerning, for example, the legal provisions in the area of child protection.

3.1 Minimal risk and minimal burden

The various risks and burdens to which the research participants are exposed must be carefully considered. Risks and burdens must be minimized.¹³

Risks and burdens depend on the respective interventions in research participants' life conditions or their personal rights, and they must be determined in relation to them.¹⁴

Particularly in the case of groups of people who are considered particularly vulnerable, it is necessary to reflect on the dangers to the research participants, for example with regard to (re)traumatisation in the research process, and what measures can be taken to minimize risks and burdens.

At the same time, it is important not to reduce the persons in question to their possible vulnerabilities, but to recognize them as subjects in the research process who make their own judgement and decisions. In this sense, the question of the assessment of risks and burdens by the research participants should be included in the process of informed consent.

In each case it is necessary to analyse which actors are or could be affected by the research and in what way – also beyond those directly involved in the research – which power relations are effective and which conflicts can result from them.

Risks that may arise for the research participants in the context of structures of social control¹⁵ or from the political-legal context¹⁶ must be reflected upon. Furthermore, information that may involve risks and burdens for the research participants should be handled with care.¹⁷

3.2 Participation

Social work research should involve research participants in research processes to the extent possible and in an appropriate manner and carefully reflect on the limits of participation.

In general, while conducting studies, it must always be ensured that the persons (groups) relevant to the research interest are appropriately involved in the research. The (re-)production of social exclusions should be avoided.

The access to the research field has to be arranged in a way that members of social groups that are related to the research interest are taken into account. In particular, the extent to which access to the field enables or prevents contact with certain (groups of) persons and the extent to which the power relations of the research field are reproduced in the process must be reflected upon.¹⁸

In the entire research process, the participation rights¹⁹, potentials and competencies of the research participants must be considered. In particular, physical, cognitive, linguistic or technical abilities, for

¹³ This can be reflected, for example, in the approach or methods for data acquisition.

¹⁴ In addition to psychological, physical and temporal burdens, the research process can also be strained due to a disappointment in relations of trust and risks of incomplete anonymisation.

¹⁵ These may be authorities, outpatient or inpatient facilities.

¹⁶ This applies, for example, to questions of determining the age and residence status of refugees.

¹⁷ This concerns, for example, studies in the context of child protection.

¹⁸ For example, via gatekeeper (this applies especially to research in the context of organizations, but also in social milieus) or the use of existing data sets or information technologies (this applies among others to sampling in the context of quantitative research).

¹⁹ Participation rights are laid down, for example, in Articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 12 of the UN Disability Rights Convention.

example, should be reflected upon and taken into account in communication with the research participants.²⁰ Strategies for dealing with them appropriately should be developed in order to critically include social conflicts that initially hinder participation of certain groups of people.²¹

If social work research aims to contribute to changing practices in the fields under investigation, it is also necessary to reflect on the way in which studies (resp. their results) are relevant to the reality of the lives of the addressees, social workers and other groups of people. Against this background, it should be examined to what extent procedures and approaches aimed at participation²² can be used effectively, i.e. whether and how affected actors should co-determine the development of research questions, the selection of methods of data acquisition and analysis, and the forms of presentation of the results, and how they should help shape the implementation of the study.²³ In doing so, it is necessary to critically reflect on the extent to which the framework conditions are suitable for participation and where the limits of participation lie.²⁴

3.3 Informed consent

Research with people whose everyday realities and perspectives are being studied requires their informed consent, i.e. comprehension on the part of the persons concerned and a voluntary decision to participate based on this.

Informed consent includes informing the persons concerned about the purpose, procedure, duration and expected nature of the results, about the consequences of their participation and about their right to terminate their participation in the research process at any time and to refuse the use of the data collected.²⁵ The assessment and decision of the research participants on possible risks and burdens as well as measures to minimize these must also be included.²⁶ Furthermore, the tasks and responsibilities of the researchers must be communicated, for example regarding the protection of confidence, data protection, the relationship of the researchers to organizations in the research setting and to mechanisms of social control.²⁷ The information process must be organized by the researchers themselves, comprehensible for those involved and, where necessary, organized with the help of assistance or language mediation.

If consent is given in written form, the document must contain the essential information and clarify the possibility of revocation. Because sometimes perspectives and focal points that may be relevant for consent only emerge during the research process, informed consent to participate in the research

²⁰ This applies, for example, in the context of studies with children, with people with cognitive impairments or with persons whose first language is not German.

²¹ This may entail, for example, consulting assistants and/or language mediators, including non-linguistic communication channels, critically reflecting on generational and other differences, or assessing rights to participation and care.

²² These may, for example, include approaches that can be attributed to participatory research.

²³ The withdrawal of the researchers from the field must also be considered and, if necessary, shaped as a sensitive transitional phase for the research participants involved – for example, with regard to their expectations of the research (impact) or participation options after the research is completed.

²⁴ The limits of participation may be, for example, the research interest, the methodological-methodical orientation of a study, institutional contexts and the associated power relations in the field.

²⁵ If research participants speak about third parties, these data may be used without their explicit consent, unless the identity of these persons can be inferred.

²⁶ It should be noted that the risks pertaining to semi-autonomous, self-learning systems, as they may be used in the development of assistance techniques, for example, cannot be sufficiently anticipated by either the research participants or the researchers.

²⁷ It may be important for the process of informed consent that researchers do not have the right to refuse to testify.

is not covered by a single signature at the beginning of the process. Informed consent should then be designed as a process that continues dynamically from the initial consent for participation in the planned research activities for data collection and its use to the publication of research results. The process of information and understanding must be documented by the researchers.²⁸ Processes of information and understanding, which aim at informed consent or non-consent, must also be related to groups or communities, if applicable.

The structuring of informed consent as a process of information and understanding in which the rights of research participants are secured must accommodate the needs, rights and opportunities of research participants in the respective constellation with their legal representatives²⁹ as well as those of the research subject. In this process, the corresponding participation rights, parental rights and the principle of minimal risks and burdens must be considered.

The realities of life and perspectives of people who are legally incapable of giving consent should not be excluded from research in social work. To what extent and under what conditions people can give consent depends on their ability to understand, judge and act regarding the specific research project or the type of participation in the research process.³⁰ The lower the individual or group-related self-interest of the participants, the higher the requirements for their capacity to consent.

Researchers are required to explore possibilities and adopt measures of decision assistance in order to also enable (apparently) incapable persons to respond authentically to their participation in research.³¹ Here, affectionate or defensive reactions, self-determined approval or rejection (without being able to see all the consequences) and fully responsible approval or rejection must be distinguished.³² In the case of persons who are unable to express their will, the willingness expressed in previous statements must be established, so long as these persons have some personal stake in the research.

Children of all ages and adults may not be involved in research against their will, even if custodians or legal guardians consent.

In research processes that rely on non-anonymous data, where the knowledge gained would be minimized or falsified if those involved were informed beforehand, the personal rights of the persons concerned must be safeguarded by means of subsequent information (debriefing) and the possibility of objecting to the use of the data.

²⁸ This can be realized, for example, in the form of field notes, but also, if necessary, through audio or video recordings of educational discussions and consent, if a written agreement is not viable/not appropriate.

²⁹ Custodians, legal guardians

³⁰ It is recognized in case law that children and adolescents can make highly personal decisions, such as the decision to testify as a witness, without the consent of their parents if it is clear "that they themselves have the maturity necessary to understand their right of refusal" (Federal Supreme Court of 6 July 1965, 5 StR 229/65). The following applies to experts who examine a person on behalf of a court in order to compile a psychiatric or psychological report: "(...) the consent of persons with limited legal capacity or incapacity may be effective. The person giving consent must not be legally competent, but must be in a position, according to his mental and moral maturity, to assess the significance and scope of the intervention and the permission" (Thür. OLG of 23.03.2018, 1 WF 67/18).

³¹ It must be considered how and, above all, with whom decision assistance can be carried out sensibly. On the one hand, close relatives can use certain communication symbols in communication. On the other hand, it may also make sense that instead of the relatives or legal guardians, suitable persons who are neither part of the family nor the guardian nor part of the research group assist the person concerned in the process of information and decision-making.

³² see Graumann, Sigrid (2018): Forschung mit, an und für Menschen mit Behinderung. Behindertenpädagogik, Vol. 57, Issue 2, pp. 129f.

The requirement of informed consent or debriefing can only be waived if the study contributes to the prevention of hazards or protection of important goods (in terms of human dignity), where informed consent would make the research impossible. The conflicting principles of the transparency of the research process, the protection of personal data, and the risks and burdens for the respective (different) parties concerned must be evaluated carefully when deciding for or against covert research projects. This type of research is an absolute exception, which requires specific legitimization within the scientific community.

Furthermore, in the case of research involving public or publicly accessible but protected areas, it must be considered to what extent informed consent can be waived on the basis of a lesser degree of intervention in personal rights if it is not possible to obtain such consent or to conduct a debriefing due to the structure of the research field.

4. The benefits of research and dealing with different interests

Assessing the benefits of research is location-bound and subject to changes in the process. Researchers should reflect on the expectations of the various actors in the context of the respective power relations.

Researchers, research participants, funding agencies and other actors involved can pursue different interests in practice, have different expectations regarding the conduct of a study, their own participation or publication of the results, and they might appropriate the ongoing research in different ways.

Against the background of the specific orientation and conception of a study, researchers should be aware of what conflicts of interest exist, what expectations can or should be fulfilled and how unfulfilled or frustrated expectations can be dealt with. In this way transparency in communication with the parties involved should be achieved, as long as other principles do not contradict. If necessary, it should also be communicated to what extent the expectations of addressees prevent or impede the process of generating scientific knowledge.

Interested research participants should have available to them the research results (of a study as a whole or regarding the interpretation of their own contributions to the study). However, the possible risks and burdens associated with feedback must be clarified. This also implies the necessity to find suitable forms of communicating research results.³³

5. Research data management and confidentiality

Research data management systems must be reviewed for their ethical acceptability. The protection of personal data and confidential information must be implemented in accordance with data protection regulations and must also be ensured for digital storage.

³³ This particularly applies to participatory and evaluation research.

Researchers must secure research data in an adequate way³⁴ and store it for an appropriate period of time.³⁵ If there are comprehensible reasons for not storing research data, researchers will explain them.³⁶

The researchers who collected the primary data are entitled to use them.³⁷ They also decide whether third parties are allowed access to the data. The subsequent use or further use of data should be examined – including in the context of digitisation.³⁸ Depending on the type of data, renewed informed consent may have to be obtained for the secondary use of data if this was not given in sufficient detail before the data was collected.³⁹ In addition, data protection regulations must be observed.

Employees, cooperation partners, assistants, language mediators, doctoral candidates and students must be committed to data protection and confidential treatment of information.

6. Publication

Researchers shall make their research results publicly available in an appropriate manner. This should not apply in cases where such disclosure is not justified, in particular where it would violate the right to the protection of confidential information.

In scientific publications, authors share the responsibility for their content, but only those who have made a significant contribution to the publication can be authors. The first author should reflect the share of the contribution.⁴⁰

From the very beginning of a research project, joint consideration should be made about the appropriate communication of research results. When providing feedback on research results in the context of organizations, the risks for the various parties involved should be reflected upon carefully.

Researchers have no control over the reception of research results. However, they should critically reflect on the extent to which the research results contribute to discrimination in social conflicts or could be used to legitimize it. This can be critically discussed in publications.

³⁴ I.e. the data must be kept locked and inaccessible to third parties. Anonymized research data must be stored separately from personal data.

³⁵ The guidelines of the German Research Foundation (DFG) generally regard ten years as an appropriate retention period. Retention is important, among others, so that possible doubts about the results can be addressed (cf. German Research Foundation (DFG) (2019): Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice. Code. Bonn, p. 20 (https://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/principles_dfg_funding/good_scientific_practice/ [28.03.2020])).

³⁶ cf. *ibid.*

³⁷ This also applies if they change university or research institution.

³⁸ The German Data Forum (RatSWD) states: “As a matter of principle, data should only be excluded from secondary use in justified cases. In the case of quantitative surveys, this is usually not necessary, as it is comparatively easy to ensure that data is safe in terms of data protection law and research ethics by using anonymisation procedures. The provision of qualitative data, texts and audio documents should also be promoted, but the generalized claim of full publication and secondary use of data does not always seem appropriate here. In individual cases, it must be examined whether the respective data allow for publication at all. For example, interview transcripts and field notes may contain a large amount of personal data, which may be extremely sensitive. The anonymisation of all this data is not always proportionate to the potential benefits of secondary use of the data beyond re-analysis to verify results.” (German Data Forum (RatSWD) (2017): *Forschungsethische Grundsätze und Prüfverfahren in den Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften*. Berlin, p. 17).

³⁹ The retention time is extended accordingly.

⁴⁰ For further details see German Research Foundation (DFG) (2019): Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Research Practice. Code. Bonn, p. 18f. (https://www.dfg.de/foerderung/grundlagen_rahmenbedingungen/gwp/ [28.03.2020])

In the case of commissioned research, the commissioners should not influence the research results. The results should be published unless serious conflicts between the different interests of the actors involved become apparent and cannot be resolved.

7. Responsibility and rights of researchers, fairness in the research process

Research processes and evaluations must be fair. Proper supervision of students and doctoral candidates must be ensured.

This requirement applies to all those involved, i.e. the management of a research project, participating colleagues, doctoral students, students, practice partners, research participants and other parties involved. The different roles, participation interests and obstacles of the participants should be reflected upon. Communication should be binding and appreciative. Within the research team, the contributions of the individual participants should be recognized.

Students and doctoral candidates must be well supervised. Teachers and supervisors are primarily responsible for the ethical quality of research that is conducted as part of teaching or qualification projects.

Evaluations of research proposals, publications or personnel decisions should be based on professional criteria and carried out in a fair manner, i.e. completely, carefully, confidentially and within a reasonable period of time. In the event of conflicts of interest, possible prejudices must be disclosed, and another solution must be found. Likewise, reviews of work in the creation of which one has personally contributed should be rejected.

Researchers are responsible for their self-care. If necessary, exchange with colleagues should be sought - even beyond the boundaries of their own organization - and/or research supervision should be utilized.

Researchers should critically reflect on the conditions under which they conduct research. They should communicate aspects which they consider problematic with regard to scientific standards and ethical principles to those responsible and, if necessary, publish them in an appropriate manner.

8. Promoting a culture of reflection⁴¹ and dealing with social practices and constellations that are questionable in terms of scientific standards and research ethics

Researchers should reflect on their own role(s) in the research project and understand research as a learning process in which they continually review and develop their ethical stance. Every researcher is challenged to be (self-)critical regarding those social practices and constellations which are considered questionable or problematic against the background of this Research Ethics Code.

⁴¹ The German Data Forum (RatSWD) “considers the teaching and training of a reflective research attitude leading to ethically sound research practice to be sensible and central. This is also particularly important because even the best formal structures and institutions cannot prevent misconduct in the research process if there is no corresponding attitude on the part of researchers” (German Data Forum (RatSWD) (2017): *Forschungsethische Grundsätze und Prüfverfahren in den Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften*. Berlin, p. 17). On the one hand, it is recommended that research ethics should be anchored in teaching and training and, on the other hand, that research ethics should be subject to self-examination, especially since not all research projects require ethical assessment by a committee. In the view of the RatSWD, reflection can be substantially promoted by communication with third parties (cf. *ibid.*, 24f.).

If dubious or problematic courses of action or social constellations are identified, the aim of collegial enquiries and interventions should be to initiate joint reflection processes among the participating actors and/or within the scientific community. These enquiries should occur in a setting appropriate to the problem, aim at a discursive understanding and clarification and serve to further develop the research-ethical attitude. Sometimes it can be helpful to enlist uninvolved third parties from the scientific community as moderators or mediators.

If reflection and clarification still prove difficult in this setting, as well as in the context of the DGSA's expert groups and sections, the latter bodies can turn to the Ethics Review Committee, which will then make a proposal on the procedure or comment on the matter. The organs of the DGSA can also turn to the Ethics Review Committee to obtain advice on practices or situations in the scientific specialist community that are considered questionable or problematic.⁴²

In cases in which clear misconduct has become known or conditions have been violated in a research project reviewed by the Ethics Review Committee, the Committee will not accept any further applications from these researchers.

Funding agencies, universities and research institutions decide on further consequences, including legal consequences, in cases of ethical and scientific misconduct.

⁴² The organs of the DGSA are the General Meeting, the Executive Board, and the Council of Spokespersons. See the constitution of the DGSA: <https://www.dgsa.de/ueber-uns/satzung/> [18.11.2020].