

The Australian Sociological Association: Code of Ethics

Introduction

In developing this code of ethics, the Australian Sociological Association (hereafter abbreviated to TASA) has drawn on internationally accepted principles and gratefully acknowledges the ethical statements of organisations such as The Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, The American Sociological Association, the International Sociological Association, the British Sociological Association, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the University of Sydney Human Ethics Committee, and the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Purpose of the Code of Ethics

1. This code of ethics provides guidelines for ethical practice and decision-making with respect to research, teaching, distribution of results, and publishing.
2. This code of ethics has educational as well as exhortative and advisory dimensions. We acknowledge that a major goal envisaged in the development and promulgation of this code of ethics is the enhancement of our collective knowledge of ethical issues and our sensitivity to the various ways in which such issues may arise. We affirm the responsibility of TASA to promote the development of this goal among all sociologists, whether or not they are members of TASA.
3. This code of ethics is not a fixed document. Its revision is an ongoing process. It will be formally reviewed at no less than three yearly intervals from adoption.
4. An Ethics Advisory Panel nominated by the Executive, will be available for consultation by members throughout the year and represented at annual conferences of TASA.
5. A member of TASA may ask the Ethics Advisory Panel to consider (and the Executive Committee to make a statement on) the ethical standing of work presented as 'sociological research', or by people identifying themselves as 'sociologists'.
6. Membership of TASA commits members to adhere to this code of ethics, and to aspire to the highest standards of research and professional practice.
7. This code of ethics is designed to be of assistance to members. Departures from its general principles should be the result of careful deliberation and peer discussion.

Professional Integrity

8. Members should maintain the integrity of sociological inquiry, and have a commitment to research that will contribute to knowledge and the pursuit and protection of 'truth'.

Ultimately, individual sociologists must take responsibility for their ethical practice in the context of the social grouping with, and for which, they choose to work.

9. Members have a responsibility to consider the interests of those involved in their research, those affected by their work, and those utilising their findings. This broad responsibility implies that in conducting research, and presenting the results, due consideration is given to the plurality of the social world, the diversity of beliefs and values, especially in the context of culture, age, gender and other aspects of social complexity, and to the requirements set out in affirmative action and anti-discrimination legislation and policies.

10. Members should recognise and respect the boundaries of their professional competence. They should be aware of the limits of their involvement in, and detachment from the areas of their study, avoid claiming expertise outside their recognised fields of competence, and refrain from giving credence to materials they, as sociologists-researchers, would regard as inadequate or tendentious.

11. Members should show respect for differences of opinion, theory, and method among all fellow researchers in the research community.

Ethical Practice

12. Members have a responsibility to maintain high standards of competence and to maintain knowledge of current information and methods in the areas they are researching.

13. Members have a responsibility to ensure that their personal circumstances do not interfere with their capacity to act, at all times, in a professional manner toward students, colleagues, research participants and sponsors.

14. Members have a responsibility to raise ethical issues with all research team members, prior to, and while undertaking research.

15. Members should inform research participants and funding agencies of any limits of confidentiality and anonymity.

16. Members should be aware of their statutory obligations to reveal information received in the course of research.

17. Members should report results honestly, should avoid actions that will violate or diminish the rights of research participants or clients, and avoid raising false expectations about the potential impact of the research.

18. Members should give an account of their methodology and report the limitations of their research design.

19. Unless there are compelling reasons, research findings should be publicly accessible, especially to the participants.

20. While it is acknowledged that members do not have direct control over the use of their research results, members should guard against the misuse of these results and where possible, take reasonable steps to correct any misuse or misrepresentation.

Research Participants

21. Members should treat with respect the participants of the research, and protect their welfare and privacy. This should encompass a respect for the inherent dignity and the rights of persons, and a commitment not to use a person only as a means to an end. Treating participants with respect may involve the protection of groups, communities or organisations to which participants belong.

22. Members have an obligation to critically examine research practices and/or research results which have the potential to harm or otherwise devalue the perspectives, experiences or cultures of research subjects.

23. Members have an obligation to ensure that promises of confidentiality and/or anonymity are maintained through careful and secure storage of research data.

24. Members have an obligation to create awareness of physical, mental, sexual, or other abuse in the community. This needs to be achieved without inflicting further harm on research participants.

25. Members should protect privacy, where appropriate, by adequately disguising personal identities in written and oral reports of the research, and by discussing only data germane to the purpose of the research.

26. Members should not reveal information received in the course of the research where an assurance of confidentiality has been promised.

27. Individuals have the right to refuse to participate in a research project, and should not be required to give a reason or justification for their decision.

28. Wherever possible and appropriate, informed consent should be sought from those individuals or social groupings directly involved in the research to be undertaken. Thus, sociologists should:

a) inform participants about the purpose and nature of the research and its possible implications for them;

b) make it clear that all have the freedom of choice to participate or not. This includes students; and

c) make it clear to research participants from whom formal consent has been obtained that they may withdraw that consent at any time without personal consequences or penalty. It should be noted however, that certain individuals (e.g. public servants) have a legally defined duty to provide information to the public.

29. In addition to the participant's consent, the consent of a parent, guardian, or carer, should be sought in cases where individuals are unable to fully understand or articulate the concept of informed consent, whether through illness, youth, or incapacity.

30. Where participants are very young, incapacitated or a member of a particularly vulnerable population, the research methods and instruments should be appropriately designed and if necessary, modified, to protect the ethical rights of, and ensure the physical, emotional and psychological safety of participants.

31. Due to their accessibility or visibility within the wider population, some individuals and groups are frequently selected as research participants, even though they are often not the main beneficiaries of the research. TASA members need to design their research to ensure that specific individuals and groups are not unfairly targetted as research participants.

32. TASA acknowledges that sociological research rarely occurs in artificial laboratory conditions, and that the research context is an unequal one in which incomplete disclosure is occasionally necessary to reveal, or enable the revelation of the 'truth', or penetrate 'lay', 'official' or 'commercial' discourses. Where full disclosure of research intentions to all participants may prevent the research from being conducted, or may unnecessarily bias the research, partial disclosure may be used, provided:

a) there is not an alternative methodology that would achieve similar objectives;

b) the significance of the research can be convincingly explained to the research community (which may include members of the 'lay' community of interest and/or the ethics committee);

c) all potential harm to participants is minimised or eliminated; and

d) where appropriate, research has been designed to include a post-research phase of explanations and de-briefing for participants.

33. Members should attempt to anticipate and avoid any adverse effects their research may have on participants. If adverse effects are noticed, they have an obligation to minimise them, and/or account for their action, and/or take agreed or negotiated steps to address the situation.

Contractual Research, Clients, and Sponsors

34. Members should respect the right of funding agencies, host institutions and publishers to be given adequate information about the research and to have their contributions acknowledged.

35. Members have a responsibility to make public the institutional or organisational context in which the research took place. Financial and other forms of support, including any contribution from the client (or sponsor) in framing and defining the research, should be openly acknowledged.

36. Members have an obligation to refrain from seeking or accepting research grants, assignments, or contracts, that are likely to violate the principles of the TASA code of ethics.

37. The privacy of research information is a matter for negotiation and agreement between the parties to the research, recognising that rights generally do not extend to material already in the public domain.

38. Before the research starts, members should clarify with the client or clients:

a) the right of the researcher to publish research and information independently from the client, or to use the research results commercially or otherwise; and

b) the nature of the responsibility and liability of the researcher regarding any use made of the research results by the client once the research is completed.

Student Research

39. Ethical consequences outlined in this document apply equally to student research and such ethics should be included in the training of sociologists.

40. As supervisors and academics, members have a responsibility to monitor, and discuss research ethics with students. Students retain ethical responsibility for their own actions, and should take account of the advice on ethics provided by their teachers, supervisors and the institution.

41. As supervisors and academics, members have a responsibility to ensure that the community is not misused as a student resource. They must take care not to exploit groups, or to place on them repetitive and burdensome demands.

42. When student research is funded by outside agencies, members who are also supervisors have a responsibility to ensure that a suitable research contract is agreed upon which provides appropriate remuneration; to make explicit agreements as to ownership and the use of data produced; and to provide protection against unethical pressures.

43. As supervisors and academics, members should ensure that reasonable precautions have been taken by students with regard to their own safety during the research process.

Authorship

44. Members must acknowledge all persons who contributed significantly to the research, writing and publication process, and, where applicable, include them as authors or co-authors.

45. Plagiarism is unacceptable.