

“United in Diversity”: Research Ethics in European Political Science

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In a recent article reviewing how national policies define research misconduct in the top forty countries for Research and Development (R&D) funding, Resnik, Rasmussen, and Kissling (2015) come to two main conclusions. First, only half the countries under consideration (22 out of 40) have a policy for national misconduct. Second, among the countries that have established such policies, there is little common understanding on what actually qualifies as misconduct in scientific research. Considering the geographical distribution of the countries examined in their study, which are spread across all the continents of the world and include Australia, Mexico, Iran, Malaysia, South Africa, the Netherlands, Russia, Poland, and the United States, these results do not appear particularly surprising. It is more surprising, however, to discover that a similar heterogeneity of approaches exists in Europe, among neighboring countries that are united at the supranational level by the European Union. Indeed, a study of research integrity guidance in the 31 countries of the European Economic Area has shown that only 19 have established national research integrity guidelines and that, as regards their content, “not one list of principles or one definition is identical in any two guidelines” (Godecharle, Nemery, and Dierickx 2013, 1097).

Based on the analysis of the regulations, the practices, and the codes of professional conduct in the region, this article seeks to develop a reasonably comprehensive picture of ethics assessment governance for the social sciences. It will show that European countries are still very diverse in the way and in the extent to which they address and regulate matters relevant to research ethics in the social sciences, and that, for the time being, a major dividing line still exists between the European and the American approaches to research ethics.

APPROACHES TO RESEARCH ETHICS

The Norwegian National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH), Europe’s oldest national level social science research ethics committee (Gurzawska and Benčin 2015), defines research ethics as “a complex set of values, standards and institutional schemes that help constitute and regulate scientific activity.”¹ Research ethics involves professional integrity standards linked to the quality of the research practice as well as standards and values that guarantee the well-being of research participants and the protection of their personal data. Israel (2014) distinguishes between two main approaches to research ethics: top-down and bottom up. Top-down approaches are imposed

by national strategies established by government bodies and institutions, which determine a set of legal requirements that social scientists must adhere to when conducting research. Bottom-up approaches are characterized by less formal measures of self-regulation by peers, professional organizations or individual research institutions, and take the form of ethical codes, charters and guidelines on academic integrity for good scientific practice. If the United States provides an example of a legalistic top-down approach, then Europe is distinguished, with very few exceptions, by bottom-up self-regulatory frameworks.

Recent studies have pointed to a more general shift away from bottom-up research ethics frameworks towards more uniform top-down national regulations and to a stronger role of ethics assessment reviews for the social sciences as well (Gurzawska and Benčin 2015; Hammersley 2010; Israel 2014). The analysis that follows, however, shows that these claims appear to be valid for only a small number of European countries.

TOWARDS JURIDIFICATION? LEGAL INTERVENTION AND ETHICAL SCRUTINY

Compared to the United States, legal intervention in social science research has taken place to a very limited extent in Europe. Most European countries do not even have national legislation governing research ethics. The only countries in the region that have established laws specifically to regulate research integrity are Sweden, Romania, Norway, and Denmark, in 2003, 2004, 2006, and 2009 respectively.² This legislation includes definitions of scientific misconduct and has established (or further defined the competences of) ad hoc commissions responsible for handling allegations of scientific dishonesty in all areas of scientific research, including the social sciences. However, research activities have become subject to growing ethical scrutiny following the establishment of a set of national acts and EU directives regulating the protection of human subjects and personal data.³ Following their introduction from the mid-1990s onwards, attention must be paid to the rights of individuals participating in research projects and to the storage, anonymity, and use of the collected data. While a cascading effect on the governance of research ethics in Europe might have been expected to spread from the biomedical field and eventually come to cover all fields of research, including the social sciences, similarly to what happened in the United States (Schrag 2009), this has taken place only to a limited extent. Human subjects and data protection

requirements have been implemented differently in different European countries and only in a few cases have ethics assessments become mandatory for the social sciences.

Research Ethics Committees

Gurzawska and Benčin reported that social science research projects have become increasingly subject to ethical assessments and that in most European countries ethics reviews are carried out internally at individual research institutions, typically by university ethics committees (2015). Indeed, a growing

internal ethical reviews of their social science projects (Jennings 2012). This is also a result of the fact that the UK's principal body for funding social science research, the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, see below), has made ethical assessments mandatory for the receipt of funding.

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number of research ethics committees (RECs) have been established in the past two decades at individual universities and research institutes to ensure that the research conducted complies with the human subjects and data protection rules. A closer look, however, reveals a more complex picture. First, while RECs have become mandatory for biomedical research, only a few have been established in social science institutions, with the exception of psychology departments. Second, where they have been established, their functions and roles are limited. Most are advisory bodies issuing guidelines and raising awareness on ethical matters, and only a minority of them perform ethics assessments. In Belgium, for example, many RECs were recently established at different universities,⁴ but the submission of research projects to the ethics commissions for the social sciences and humanities is not mandatory. Ethical assessments are “strongly encouraged” if potential physical, psychological, or social risks for the participants can be envisaged, if participants belong to so-called “vulnerable groups,” or if “sensitive topics” (such as illegal activities, religion, ethnicity) are being addressed. In the Netherlands too, numerous social science institutes have established research ethic committees, especially following the adoption of the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act. While in principle all research involving human participants appears to fall under the new regulatory requirements (a contested issue in itself in the Netherlands),⁵ there are hardly any assessments by RECs for the social sciences.

One relevant exception in Europe where RECs have proliferated and where they actively perform ethical assessments in the social sciences is the United Kingdom. Here, RECs have a longstanding tradition, some having existed for more than three decades (Israel 2014). Since new legislation on human rights and data protection was introduced, research has shown that their number has increased and their scope widened to include all research involving human participants (Tinker and Coomber 2004). Currently, virtually all research-oriented institutions in the country have established RECs to perform

institutions to create RECs to review the research of their staff and students. This can clearly be seen in the example of Finland, where 56 research institutes voluntarily committed themselves to the proposal issued by the National Advisory Board on Research Ethics for the introduction of an ethical review system for all research projects using social and behavioral science research methods.⁶ Thus, although the number of RECs in social science departments has increased, their spread as well as their functions should not be overstated. In the large majority of European countries, RECs have been established for the biomedical sciences only, while within the social sciences their presence is mostly concentrated in psychology departments. With regard to sociology and political science, the presence of research ethics committees is still restricted to a limited number of countries in the region. Consultation with social scientists from southern, central and eastern Europe has revealed that ethical assessments are hardly ever carried out internally in faculties, with responsibility for the ethical conduct of research being left to individual researchers.

Ethics Reviews in Research Funding Organizations

In contrast, there is a greater uniformity across European countries with regard to ethics assessments at research funding organizations. Indeed, although to various degrees, funding organizations in all European countries require applicants to show at least some concern for integrity and ethics issues when presenting research proposals.

In some cases, the requirements are quite loose. In Hungary, Poland, and Serbia, for example, funding organizations only require grant applicants to observe professional integrity standards when conducting research. In these countries, an ethics review is needed only in the biomedical field and does not take place for social science projects.⁷ In the Netherlands, too, the actual screening of research projects is done for biomedical sciences only. However, the main funding organization for scientific research in the Netherlands⁸ requires

applicants to state that they are familiar with the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Scientific Practice on research integrity policy (VSNU 2012), highlight the possible ethical aspects of the research project, and give a summary of which measures have been or will be taken with regard to ethical aspects. Similar requirements apply for the submission of research projects involving children and persons not able to give consent, or that involve the collection and processing of personal data (e.g. health, sexuality, ethnicity, political opinions, religious, or philosophical convictions) to the Swedish Research Council (Israel 2014), the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology, and the Research Foundation Flanders. The latter two bodies also require a declaration of ethics compliance by the host organization.⁹

Norway and the United Kingdom are among the few European countries where ethics assessments are performed for all research projects, including those in the social sciences, as a precondition for their funding. In the UK, since the ESRC's revised Framework for Research Ethics (FRE) was issued in 2010, research projects where no ethical reviews are conducted have become exceptional.¹⁰ Different screening systems ("light touch" and "full" reviews) apply, depending on the level of risk of the project. In Norway, applications submitted to the Research Council of Norway are reviewed

Moreover, and especially from the early 2000s, the European Union has backed various initiatives aimed at harmonizing ethical standards across all disciplines and establishing greater consistency in regulatory approaches to research ethics. With regard to the social sciences, the first set of professional guidelines were laid down in the Code of Professional Conduct in Socio-Economic Research (2003), which brought together the contents of a number of existing professional codes and aimed to contribute to the development of common principles and procedures that could be broadly applicable across all the socio-economic research conducted in the EU.¹⁴ More recently, in 2005, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Research and Innovation issued the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers, which outline, respectively, recommendations for researchers and funding institutes and principles for hiring and appointing researchers. The principles of the Charter and the Code were endorsed by 37 countries and signed by several national universities and research institutes.¹⁵ Recently, research integrity codes, such as the Memorandum on Scientific Integrity and the European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, were also issued by the All European Academies (ALLEA) European Science Foundation.

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by the grant award committee. Research proposals must specify the ethical issues pertaining to the project and provide a description of how such issues will be dealt with. Moreover, all projects that require the collection, recording or storing of personal data must be made known to the Data Protection Official for Research, namely the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD), which verifies that they conform with the national Personal Data Act.¹¹ Mandatory ethical scrutiny is also required by the German Research Foundation in the fields of psycholinguistics, education, and sociology, when "physical or emotional risks are envisaged".¹² Moreover, a number of national research funding organizations have recently adopted the European Union ethics review procedures. Researchers are required to fill in a standard ethics self-assessment table describing the ethical issues that may arise during their research and to specify how they will deal with associated problems.

CODES OF GOOD SCIENTIFIC CONDUCT

In contrast with legal enforcement, the social science ethics frameworks of the large majority of European countries consist of non-binding codes of ethics and guidelines on good scientific practice (Israel 2014; NordForsk 2015). Issued by national ethics committees, research funding organizations, individual universities, research institutes, and professional organizations at different levels, the proliferation of such codes can be observed in all European countries.¹³

Quite surprisingly, no such abundance of codes of professional conduct can be found at the level of the national political science associations. Indeed, while numerous professional organizations in the fields of psychology and sociology, have developed ethical codes addressing matters relevant to research ethics (Gurzawska and Benčin 2015), these are virtually absent in the political sciences. Only seven out of the 27 political science associations consulted for this study have introduced a specific code, namely those of France, Germany, Ireland, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom (see online Appendices).¹⁶ These codes address ethical considerations in the broadest sense and include, with different levels of emphasis, principles and criteria for upholding scientific standards of integrity in the profession as well as measures for the protection of research subjects, including informed consent, confidentiality, and data anonymity. The French, German and Dutch political science associations have also established specific Ethics Commissions. These three commissions have similar functions—most importantly, to provide general advice on ethical matters to the Board of Directors and supervise the implementation of the principles set up in the respective codes—although the German and Dutch commissions have greater responsibilities in evaluating and reporting infringements in comparison with the French one, the role of which is merely consultative. Aside from the Swiss and UK political science associations, which introduced professional codes

in the mid-1990s, the remaining five established such codes only in the last decade. This suggests that growing attention is being paid to research ethics in the profession. It should be added that many of the associations that were contacted for this study expressed an interest in this topic and envisaged the possibility of developing a code of ethics in the near future. For the time being, however, the fact that such a limited number of political science associations have established an ethics code further confirms the dividing line in research ethics between the United States (where the American Political Science Association (APSA) published its first written code of professional conduct in 1967) and Europe.

CONCLUSIONS

Ethical considerations in the social sciences in Europe have received increasing attention in the last two decades. More laws and more codes of conduct have been established, and a growing number of ethics reviews have been performed. This is the result of a plurality of factors. Changes in the legal framework with relation to human rights and data protection have accounted for the establishment in a number of European countries of research ethics committees at the level

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of individual research institutes and for the increasing role of ethics (self-)assessment procedures in externally-funded social science research projects. Beyond the legal requirements, greater attention to ethics in research can also be explained in the light of the broader concern for responsible behavior in both public and private activities. According to Dench, Iphofen and Huws (2013, 4), just as private and public organizations “are expected to be more accountable and customer-focused,” integrity frameworks are increasingly deemed essential in order to contribute to the legitimation of science and increase the credibility of scientific research in the eyes of the broader public.¹⁷ Finally, a number of recently issued codes of scientific conduct have pointed to the importance of soliciting ethical reflections and developing an awareness of good scientific practices following the specific changes that the academic profession has experienced in the latest decades, the impacts of which are seen as potentially pernicious for the integrity of researchers. In particular, as research output has become the essential criterion for success in academic performance, the temptation to achieve rapid scientific results through questionable and unfair means has increased.¹⁸

However, it is still the case that only a small minority of European countries have taken ethical concerns seriously thus far. Israel has noted that “outside the Nordic countries surprisingly little is published on the regulation of social sciences research ethics in much of continental Europe” (2014, 45).

The “ethics creep” (Haggerty 2004)—that is, the increasing bureaucratization of institutional review boards and the expanding reach of the ethics review—has not yet been extended to political science research in Europe.

Why have some countries in Europe given less attention to ethical standards than others? Is it a matter of resistance to the “stultifying and perverse systems that have been created elsewhere in the Anglophone world” (Dingwall 2008, 11)? When observing that countries such as France, Germany and Italy had made no moves towards research ethics juridification in the social sciences, the author (2012) suggested that this may be due to the stronger attachment to freedom of expression and the general distrust of restrictions stemming from post-dictatorial regimes. This path-dependent argument would not, however, explain the fact that reluctance towards the juridification of research ethics encompasses a much wider spectrum of European countries. In fact, the absence of research ethics committees in the large majority European countries does not appear to be the result of a conscious opposition towards ethical scrutiny in the name of freedom of expression, but seems rather to be the product of a general indifference or lack of consideration of the topic.

Kalleberg (2015) has instead argued that approaching research ethics through legal norms might be undesirable when ethical principles become misunderstood and treated as particularistic legal and administrative rules, thus losing their universalistic and cosmopolitan character. Other authors critical of the juridification of social science research have typically pointed to the “bio-medical template” as strangling and censoring the discipline (Heimer and Petty 2010; Hammersley 2010; Schrag 2011). Recently, a joint declaration signed by more than 30 representatives of national research councils has called upon EU legislators to revise the amendments to the new Data Protection framework, because the proposed reform would undermine a wide range of academic disciplines, including the social sciences.¹⁹ If juridification is a contested and possibly undesirable option, the European experience described in this paper also shows that bottom-up self-regulation practices do not necessarily stimulate researchers to think critically about ethics in their profession. In the large majority of European countries, especially in southern, central, and eastern Europe, social and political scientists are unaware of the existing legal requirements that indirectly affect the common methodologies and practices of their research (such as interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, etc.). They also have virtually no knowledge of the presence of ethical codes at either the national or the European levels. Israel’s argument that “it is not until researchers *are compelled* to

respond to research ethics committee requirements that they give detailed consideration to ethical issues” (2014, 168, italics added) indeed appears to be valid. Research funding organizations may function as a powerful lever in this respect. The introduction of ethics clauses informing applicants of their obligation to comply with research integrity standards as well as ethical self-assessments describing the possible ethical aspects of the research force researchers to think critically about ethical issues before and throughout the whole research project. Given their increasing importance for supporting research activities and for determining researchers’ career opportunities, research funding organizations can play an important role in the diffusion of ethical considerations among the political science community in Europe as well.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1049096516001542>.*

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NOTES

- Guidelines for research ethics in the social sciences, law and the humanities, National Committee for Research Ethics in Norway, 2006, p. 5: <http://www.etikkom.no/English/NESH/guidelines>.
- Act concerning the Ethical Review of Research Involving Humans 2003:460, amended by SFS 2008:192 (Sweden); Law 206/2004 on good conduct in scientific research, technological development and innovation (Romania); Act of the 30th of June 2006, no. 56, on Ethics and Integrity in Research (Norway); Consolidated Act no. 306 of 24 April 2009 (Denmark).
- The two most relevant European Union directives are the Data Protection Directive (Directive on the protection of individuals with regard to the processing of personal data and on the free movement of such data, 1995/46/EC) and the clinical Trials Directive (Requirements to implement good clinical practice in the conduct of clinical trials on medicinal products for human use, 2001/20/EC).
- A list of universities that introduced ethics commissions in Belgium is available here: <http://www.fwo.be/nl/het-fwo/organisatie/ethische-adviezen/>.
- The Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Science (ECSS) of Radboud University refers to an “unfortunate ambiguous phrasing” of the Medical Research Involving Human Subjects Act, which was introduced in order to provide protection for all human participants involved in medical research only. See: <http://www.ru.nl/socialsciences/ethics-committee/ethics-committee/>.
- National Advisory Board on Research Ethics (Tutkimuseettinen neuvottelukunta, TENK): <http://www.tenk.fi/>.
- Hungarian Scientific Research Fund (Országos Tudományos Kutatási Alapprogramok, OTKA); Polish National Science Centre (Narodowe Centrum Nauki, NCN); Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development in Serbia.
- Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, NWO): www.nwo.nl.
- Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia, FCT): www.fct.pt; Flemish Research Foundation (Fonds Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, FWO): <http://www.fwo.nl>.
- For more details on ESRC ethical guidelines, see <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/>.
- Act of 14 April 2000 No. 31 relating to the processing of personal data.
- German Research Foundation (Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG): <http://www.dfg.de/>.
- See the ethics codes brought together by the RESPECT project: <http://www.respectproject.org/links/links.php?id=ethics>.
- Code of professional conduct in socio-economic research, and database of professional bodies: <http://www.respectproject.org/standards/prof-conduct.pdf>.
- See <http://ec.europa.eu/euraxess/index.cfm/rights/whatIsAResearcher>.
- The twenty-seven political science associations consulted include all European International Political Science Association (IPSA) Collective Members’ Associations, except for Georgia, Russia and Turkey. The list of associations is available at the IPSA webpage <http://www.ipsa.org/membership/collective/list>. In 2013 also the Committee on Political Sciences of the Polish Academy of Sciences introduced a Code of Ethics, based on the one by IPSA.
- Similar considerations can be found in the Belgian Code of Ethics (Code d’éthique de la recherche scientifique en Belgique: https://www.ulg.ac.be/upload/docs/application/pdf/2010-11/ethcode_fr.pdf).
- See German Research Foundation. 2013. *Proposals for Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice. Recommendations of the Commission on Professional Self Regulation in Science*; Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences. 2002. *Integrity in scientific research Principles and procedures*; Association Française de Science Politique. 2009. *Charte d’Ethique Professionnelle*.
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