

Overview

Robust scientific inquiry depends critically on the mainstreaming of ethical research practice and the professional integrity of researchers. Scientists have moved beyond the simplistic view of obstructive institutional committees focused on corporate protection towards a research culture that recognises the value of ethical practices in enhancing public trust in research and researchers, and consequently in policymakers. Yet many global variations remain in how the mechanisms operate. The fundamental challenge, as with all moral principles and values, is to secure a measure of uniform practice in research and policy advice that is increasingly multi-national and interdisciplinary at the same time as respecting national and local cultural difference.

It goes without saying that reliable and valid evidence for making policy should be ethically generated. All too often policies are ideologically based and challenging evidence is massaged, misinterpreted, sidelined or ignored. Recognition of such 'selective' practices has led research funders, the European Commission in particular, to support several connected projects focused on research ethics and scientific integrity. The Academy of Social Sciences was a lead consortium partner in the [PRO-RES project](#), which was funded as a coordinating and support action (CSA) under Horizon 2020. Contributors from different disciplinary backgrounds in eight EU member states included academic researchers; research funding and performing organisations; and policy-influencing evidence gatherers such as lobbyists, think tanks, journalists and bloggers. Participants were chosen because they had experience, expertise and understanding of what works in a range of different national contexts, and within a selection of key areas of contemporary concern. Their interests included: climate and environmental science; covert research and surveillance; Artificial Intelligence, robotics and smart information systems; actions to deal with disasters, crises and pandemics; data protection; systemic racism; health protection and promotion; trust in science and societal resilience. The aim of the project was to build a research ethics and integrity framework devised cooperatively with, and seen as acceptable by, relevant stakeholders across the non-medical sciences.

Key evidence

The research ethics and integrity framework was designed:

- to balance political, institutional and professional contradictions and constraints
- to reduce uncertainty
- to rise above ideological prejudices
- to ensure policy could be authentically seen as 'evidence-based'.

The first pillar for the framework brought together experts versed in the construction of research ethics codes and guidelines, and ethics training for researchers. The project team worked to establish the internationally accepted principles, values, norms and standards that govern or guide responsible scientific practice. After an initial desk research exercise, in-person workshop debates confronted key divides between disciplinary fields: between ecologists and engineers, data protectors and investigative journalists, as well as covert researchers and human rights advocates. Similar challenges had to be addressed in response to the pressures on different evidence gatherers: between think tanks, 'blue skies' academics and policy practitioners. The only data that could be gathered in such a complex situation were of a qualitative nature representing the views and opinions of individual stakeholders grounded in their personal experience.

Eventually, a consensus was achieved based on insights gained from hearing experts within the boundaries of different cultural and institutional constraints and opportunities. The [STEP ACCORD \(pp.6-9\)](#) was devised to take account of the different interests of stakeholders. The ACCORD encapsulated the

common elements of ethical practice that trustworthy scientists should be able to sign up to in a series of statements of intention acknowledging that:

It is in the interests of the scientific community to ensure the evidence produced is reliable and trustworthy and ethically generated. It is in the interests of those who make policy to be able to assure the decision takers (and the general public) that evidence has been generated in the best possible way.

The ACCORD was backed up by the rest of the framework, which included a [toolbox \(pp.10-20\)](#) to aid ethical practices and a range of resources that could assist researchers seeking to conduct their work with integrity. Five tools were developed:

- **Tool 1, code building:** Recommendations for Code Builders, Adopters and Users
- **Tool 2, evaluating research evidence:** A comprehensive prose account of a research/evidence generating activity
- **Tool 3, generating evidence checklist:** DOs and DON'Ts for researchers generating evidence for the use of policymakers, think tanks, funders or commissioners of research
- **Tool 4, using evidence checklist:** DOs and DON'Ts for policymakers or their advisers to ensure their policies have been generated ethically and with integrity
- **Tool 5, ethical issues in covert research, security and surveillance:** Discipline specific guidance notes for research ethics reviewers and policymakers

Policy context

Given the variety of cultural and disciplinary backgrounds of stakeholders, the findings were disseminated in open access formats: for example on [interdisciplinary and international research](#), that could be downloaded according to interest as edited books or book chapters addressing specific topics. Knowing that policymakers and their advisors are necessarily highly selective in the information they access and have little time available to read scholarly papers in academic journals, contributors to the project were asked to write as pragmatically as possible while also supplying the evidence to back up their arguments. This same approach was intended to meet the needs of the diverse evidence gatherers in the specific policy domains for which the findings were intended.

Although topics of contemporary relevance were selected for specific readers, the general features of ethical evidence-gathering were drawn out in response to new and emerging concerns. Another open access volume addressed issues concerned with [covert, security and surveillance research](#). A third volume argued for the value of the [case study](#) in informing policy. While cases studies are inevitably context specific, the volume shows how a case study can both engage the reader and aid the extrapolation of solutions to novel situations.

Recommendations

Assessing the impact in evidence-based policy research of high standards of ethics and integrity remains challenging. It requires:

- more longitudinal evaluations
- an institutional infrastructure which facilitates and supports professional integrity
- a supportive culture that works across national and disciplinary differences
- research agencies equipped to ensure ethical appraisal and monitoring of all their work
- evidence gatherers capable of sharing an ethos of responsibility as research professionals through appropriate professional associations
- policymakers and advisors supplied with reliable and valid ethically-grounded evidence.