



Consolidated SIMPLIFY Workshop Report: Ethical Challenges and Governance of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH)

Background and Objectives

The two workshop groups shared a common objective: to reflect on ethical challenges that are characteristic of Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH) research and to identify how current ethics governance structures can better support responsible research practices. Participants represented different areas of expertise, including research ethics, research integrity, institutional governance, and SSH methodologies. Discussions revolved around three guiding questions:

1. What ethical challenges are characteristic of SSH research?
2. Where do current ethics review structures face limitations?
3. How can ethics governance better support responsible research?

Across both groups, discussions highlighted that ethics in SSH differs from traditional biomedical approaches because SSH research often takes place in dynamic social environments, involves direct engagement with people and communities, and addresses issues that may be politically, culturally, or socially sensitive. Participants repeatedly emphasised that ethics should not be understood solely as a regulatory requirement but as an integral component of research quality and responsible research culture.

Ethical Challenges Characteristic of SSH Research

Context-dependent and evolving ethical challenges

Participants agreed that SSH research often involves ethical challenges that evolve during the research process rather than being fully identifiable at the project design stage. Unlike laboratory research, where procedures may be highly standardised, SSH research frequently involves fieldwork, qualitative methods, ethnographic observation, and interactions with communities where unforeseen situations emerge.

Researchers therefore often face situations where ethical decisions must be made continuously rather than through one-off decisions at the beginning of a project. Ethical governance structures that rely exclusively on fixed protocols may struggle to accommodate this evolving reality.

Incentives and participant recruitment

The use of incentives for research participation generated considerable discussion. Participants recognised that compensation can be appropriate because participants contribute time, expertise, and effort to research projects. However, concerns were raised about situations in which incentives could unintentionally influence participation decisions.

Particular concerns arise when research involves vulnerable groups or economically disadvantaged populations. Incentives that appear reasonable in one context may create



unintended pressure in another. Participants emphasised that ethics review should carefully examine proportionality and context rather than applying universal rules.

Political sensitivity and societal implications

Many SSH studies investigate topics such as migration, governance, inequality, conflict, public policy, and social identities. Participants observed that these subjects may expose participants to social, political, or reputational risks.

Researchers themselves may also experience external pressures from institutions, governments, advocacy groups, or public opinion. Ethical review therefore needs to consider broader societal consequences beyond immediate participant risks.

Researcher safety and well-being

An important theme emerging from the discussions was the need to recognise researcher safety as an ethical issue. Existing ethics systems traditionally focus on protecting participants, while less attention has been given to risks faced by researchers themselves.

Participants noted that fieldwork in challenging environments, research involving vulnerable populations, or studies of controversial subjects may expose researchers to:

- Physical risks;
- Psychological burdens;
- Emotional stress;
- Online harassment;
- Digital security threats.

Participants argued that researcher protection should become a more explicit consideration within ethics governance systems.

Privacy, confidentiality, and data governance

Data protection and confidentiality were identified as central challenges in SSH research. Researchers often collect highly sensitive personal information through interviews, observations, digital platforms, and participatory methods.

Participants highlighted that anonymisation may be difficult in small communities where participants remain identifiable even after personal information is removed. While legal frameworks such as data protection regulations provide important guidance, participants stressed that ethical responsibilities often extend beyond legal requirements.

Legal requirements versus ethical responsibility

Discussions repeatedly returned to the distinction between legal compliance and ethical responsibility. Participants stressed that actions may be legally permissible but ethically problematic, while legal rules may not fully address complex realities encountered in SSH research.



Participants therefore emphasised the need for ethical judgement and reflexivity rather than reliance solely on procedural compliance.

Incidental findings and ethical dilemmas

SSH researchers may unexpectedly encounter information indicating harm, abuse, criminal activity, or severe vulnerabilities among participants. Such situations can create difficult tensions between confidentiality obligations and responsibilities for participant welfare.

Participants considered these situations particularly challenging because they often require immediate judgement under uncertain circumstances.

Use of deception in research

Participants discussed the use of deception in behavioural and experimental research. Although deception may sometimes be methodologically necessary, it was generally viewed as ethically sensitive.

Discussions highlighted the importance of:

- Strong methodological justification;
- Limiting deception to situations where alternatives are unavailable;
- Careful assessment of proportionality;
- Appropriate debriefing procedures.

Limitations of Current Ethics Review Structures

Limited SSH expertise

Participants noted that many ethics systems historically evolved from biomedical models and therefore may lack expertise regarding SSH methodologies such as:

- Ethnography;
- Participatory research;
- Qualitative interviews;
- Digital research methods.

This can create inconsistencies in evaluations and produce review requirements poorly suited to SSH research practices.

Resource constraints and institutional support

Resource limitations emerged as one of the strongest themes across both workshops.

Participants observed that ethics committees frequently depend on voluntary work performed in addition to existing responsibilities. Examples of missing institutional support included:

- Limited administrative assistance;
- Lack of dedicated staff;



- Insufficient training opportunities;
- Absence of recognition for committee work;
- Lack of allocated time.

Participants repeatedly questioned how ethics committees can be expected to review increasingly complex and interdisciplinary projects without corresponding resources.

Organisational fragmentation

Participants highlighted fragmentation between ethics review systems, research integrity structures, legal services, and data protection offices.

This fragmentation may create confusion for researchers who are uncertain about where responsibilities lie or which support mechanisms should be consulted.

Inflexibility of existing review mechanisms

Current ethics review systems often rely on single approval decisions made before research begins. Participants noted that this approach may not reflect the iterative nature of many SSH projects.

Rather than one-time approvals, participants suggested more adaptive and continuous approaches that allow ethical issues emerging during fieldwork to be addressed over time.

Strengthening Ethics Governance

Ethics as a mechanism for quality assurance

Participants strongly emphasised that ethics should not be viewed as merely a compliance exercise or administrative obstacle.

Instead, ethics should be understood as contributing directly to:

- Better research design;
- Stronger methodological rigour;
- Increased credibility;
- Greater societal relevance;
- Public trust in research.

Ethics by Design

A major recommendation was adopting an “Ethics by Design” approach. Ethical considerations should be integrated from the earliest phases of project planning rather than addressed only during formal review stages.

Participants argued that this approach would promote continuous ethical reflection throughout the research lifecycle.

Expanding education and training



Participants considered ethics education fundamental for developing responsible research cultures.

Training priorities identified included:

- Researcher safety;
- Responsible data management;
- Participatory methods;
- Artificial intelligence and emerging technologies;
- Open science;
- Ethical challenges associated with digital research.

Consultation services and ethical spaces

Participants repeatedly stressed the need for spaces where researchers can discuss ethical challenges collectively.

Potential mechanisms included:

- Ethics consultation services;
- Advisory boards;
- Communities of practice;
- Institutional networks;
- Guidance materials and online resources.

Such structures could provide ongoing support beyond formal ethics approval.

Leadership and institutional responsibility

A recurring message was that the challenge is often not a lack of awareness but rather insufficient institutional leadership and resources.

Participants suggested that universities should:

- Recognise ethics work formally;
- Allocate dedicated funding;
- Support committee members;
- Establish sustainable governance structures;
- Embed ethics within institutional strategy.

Future Priorities

Participants identified several priorities for future action:

- Identifying examples of good practice;



- Strengthening funder accountability;
- Exploring dedicated funding for ethics review activities;
- Improving governance approaches for research security;
- Increasing public awareness of the societal value of SSH research.

There was also interest in learning from international examples where funders and institutions have developed governance models adapted to diverse forms of research.

Overall Take-Home Message

Across both workshop groups, participants converged around a central conclusion: ethics in SSH research should move beyond a narrow compliance framework and become embedded within institutional culture and research practice. Strong leadership, sustainable resources, flexible governance systems, and continuous ethical reflection were repeatedly identified as essential conditions for responsible and high-quality research.