

# Code of Ethics of the (German) Academy of Sociology (AS)<sup>1,2</sup>

*English Translation of Version 1 from January 2022*

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## **Preamble**

The social relevance of scientific knowledge produced by analytical-empirical sociology places high demands on the professional conduct of sociologists. The creation and dissemination of sociological knowledge occurs in social processes that demand a high level of ethical competence: Research with and about people requires a special degree of personal responsibility and sensitivity for ethical considerations. The AS expressly welcomes the efforts of leading national and international research institutions to ensure good scientific practice and, building on these, has formulated ethical principles for analytical-empirical sociology. This Code of Ethics presents key principles that sociologists should observe in the search for scientific knowledge and in the dissemination and evaluation of research results. These include, in particular,

1. Working *lege artis* in scientific practice, consistently questioning all results—including one's own—and ensuring intersubjective verifiability;
2. Handling research resources responsibly and working towards cumulative progress in knowledge;
3. Publishing results without omissions and being strictly honest about one's own contributions and those of others;
4. Respecting the personal rights of research subjects and only waiving the right of subjects to informed consent in justified exceptions;
5. Interacting professionally and respectfully with colleagues and ensuring the best possible training and supervision of young researchers—also in terms of ethical principles.

With these principles, the Code aims to contribute to the further professionalization of sociology as an academic discipline. These principles are explained in detail below.

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<sup>1</sup> This text was compiled by Katrin Auspurg, Josef Brüderl, and Stefanie Kley. Andreas Diekmann provided important supplementary information.

<sup>2</sup> Citation reference: Academy of Sociology (2024): Code of Ethics of the Academy of Sociology. Mannheim. <https://akademie-soziologie.de/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Code-of-Ethics-AS-2024.pdf>

## 1. Principles of good scientific practice

Sociologists are guided in their academic work (including commissioned research) by the established principles of good scientific practice, such as those formulated by the DFG (DFG 2019). In detail:

- a. **Lege Artis:** In their professional work, sociologists are guided exclusively by recognized principles for scientific work. Research and teaching must be kept free from external influences and non-scientific bias. In their research and teaching activities, sociologists develop and communicate scientific knowledge independently of political ideologies or world views or religions.
- b. **Institutionalized doubt:** Science means constant doubt. Sociologists are always prepared to justify their scientific approach in relation to their specific research objective and to make it accessible to rational criticism. They are open to objective, fact-based criticism of their own research results. Errors uncovered by convincing arguments, regardless of their origin, but beyond value judgements, are to be corrected. New questions, approaches and methods are to be examined impartially, regardless of their origin.
- c. **Intersubjective verifiability:** Research must be intersubjectively verifiable. To ensure this, the research process should be described (i) precisely and (ii) transparently, (iii) the materials and data that were analyzed should be made available and (iv) replications should be supported. These procedures fundamentally ensure that scientific studies can be replicated. Only in this way can a verified body of knowledge be constructed.
  - i. Sociologists use precise and logically consistent arguments (without any value judgements). Unnecessarily complex arguments and superfluous technical jargon hinder intersubjective verifiability and are exclusionary. Technical terms should be precisely defined.
  - ii. All assumptions and details of theories, research designs, methods of knowledge acquisition, as well as all individual findings and other information should be documented as comprehensively as necessary so that research results can be reviewed and evaluated, also with regard to the limits of their validity.
  - iii. When working empirically, researchers make all their instruments for data collection, the data they collect and information on data processing and analysis available for subsequent use and replication, insofar as this is (legally) possible. Although the use of self-generated data is initially restricted to the researchers who collected it, in the medium term, data as well as other survey instruments and analytical materials should only be excluded from secondary use in well-founded individual cases.
  - iv. Sociologists support the reproduction or replication of their work by passing on any necessary additional information to those replicating it.
- d. **Acknowledging the state of research:** Identifying relevant research questions and suitable data collection methods requires a thorough and conscientious review of research that has already been made publicly available. When planning a project, sociologists should consider and acknowledge the state of research. All relevant

original sources must be listed. This also applies to data, software, analytical files and other materials used.

- e. **Limits of expertise:** Sociologists recognize the limits of their expertise and only take on tasks for which they are qualified by education, training or experience. When sociologists make judgments, they should adequately explain their expertise and the limits to the generalizability and reliability of their statements and clearly identify speculation as such.
- f. **Universalism:** Sociologists take note of scientific findings regardless of the person producing the research and their social attributes. Only the argument counts, not the person presenting it.
- g. **Academic freedom:** Sociologists defend the fundamental right to academic freedom and the independence of academic research. The fundamental right is not formally restricted, but may be limited in cases where it could violate other fundamental rights. A thorough assessment of the consequences of the research for other people should therefore be conducted for all projects.
- h. **Misconduct:** Scientific misconduct must be avoided. Such misconduct is deemed to have occurred if, in a scientifically relevant context, deliberate or grossly negligent misrepresentations are made (e.g. data or images are manipulated), the intellectual property of others is infringed (e.g. research approaches and ideas are exploited by reviewers, unjustified co-authorships are assumed, ideas and work are passed on to third parties without authorization) or the scientific process is impaired in any other way (e.g. by the unnecessary removal of primary data). Misconduct also arises if no intervention is made when there is clear evidence of serious misconduct of co-workers (e.g. reporting to an ombudsperson). At the same time, misconduct also includes accusing others of misconduct without evidence or otherwise unfairly impairing their reputation and research activities.

## 2. Responsible use of research resources and cumulative progress in knowledge

Sociologists promote the archiving and re-use of research data and the efficient handling of research resources.<sup>3</sup>

- a. **Easily findable archives:** In order to ensure that they can be found, traced and re-used, researchers shall, whenever possible, deposit the main materials underlying their research and publications in recognized archives and repositories in accordance with the FAIR principles (Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reproducible). Even if re-use by other researchers is not (legally) permissible, primary data must be archived appropriately insofar as this is necessary for verifying results.
- b. **Secondary analyses:** Before collecting primary data, especially if these are financed with public money and/or demand (time) resources from research participants, researchers should check whether the research objectives could be achieved in a

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<sup>3</sup> For more details, see the "AS Guidelines on the Handling of Research Data in Sociology".

more resource-efficient way with data that are already available. It is unethical to apply for funds primarily to achieve a high level of third-party funding.

- c. **Honest re-use:** Sociologists who request data from colleagues for reanalysis with the aim of verifying the conclusions may only use the data for the purpose stated in the request. Prior written permission must be obtained for any other use of the data.
- d. **Cumulative progress in knowledge:** When planning projects, cumulative progress in knowledge should be considered. The state of research should be extended by targeted variation relating to existing data and operationalizations. If possible, only the variables of interest are varied. In addition, attention should be paid to optimizing comparability, thus forging connections to existing knowledge.
- e. **Information on projects:** To ensure that research is as resource-efficient, cumulative and transparent as possible, it is also advisable to provide information on primary data collection independently of and prior to releasing the initial results. This can take the form of pre-registrations of experiments, including key hypotheses, on the usual platforms, or also posting information on institutional and personal websites with links to explanatory documents and instruments on open science platforms. This is the only way other researchers can learn about related projects at an early stage. In cases of subsequent use, pre-registration of hypotheses and planned analyses can also be useful.

### 3. Principles for the dissemination of scientific knowledge

Sociologists ensure appropriate dissemination of all relevant results, including those that contradict their own hypotheses or are not significant. They adequately report the contributions of all participating researchers according to their shares of the output.

- a. **Publish without selective omissions:** Sociologists make their scientific findings fully and unconditionally accessible and thus ensure their inclusion in the cumulative process of research and teaching. To this end, they make their research results public in an appropriate manner after the completion of projects or analyses. If publication options are limited by legal or other unavoidable ethical obligations (such as the protection of confidential data or the psychological/social integrity of the subjects), sociologists endeavor to maintain the right to publication as far as possible.
- b. **Avoid publication bias:** Everyone involved in disseminating and presenting research work, whether as author, reviewer or editor, should fulfill their role without distorting or omitting important results. This also includes transparently presenting non-significant, unexpected or contradictory results to ensure a well-founded assessment of the research findings. In particular, research results that contradict the researcher's theory or hypotheses must also be published.
- c. **Avoid overly detailed publications:** Sociologists—following the principle of quality over quantity—avoid fragmenting their results into overly detailed publications. They cite results that have already been made publicly available. In this way, they

help to represent the state of research as clearly as possible and to allocate resources to projects as sensibly as possible.

- d. **No plagiarism:** The authorship of data, ideas and materials that have been taken verbatim or in spirit from others (even from unpublished works) must be clearly identified. Even lengthy adaptations from the author's own publications must be clearly identified (e.g. translations should include a reference to the original publication).
- e. **Acknowledge all genuine contributions:** In publications (including working papers), everyone who has made a significant contribution to the research work and/or the publication must be listed by name. An author is anyone who has made a genuine, identifiable contribution to the content. All authors agree on the final version. They bear joint responsibility, unless explicitly stated otherwise.
- f. **Ensure transparency regarding contributions and responsibilities:** In the case of co-authorship, authors' individual contributions and responsibilities should be disclosed as clearly as possible and, where this is customary, the scope of the contributions should also be appropriately expressed in the order of authorship. Where possible, co-authors should monitor each other in the preparation of results and conclusions.
- g. **Ensure transparency with regard to funding and possible bias:** All facts that could even potentially lead to conflicts of interest or bias must be disclosed in scientific work. For example, all external support, such as sources of funding and infrastructure used, must be disclosed in publications. In the case of contracted and commissioned research, care must be taken to ensure that the publication of methods, research results and data are permitted to the greatest extent possible.
- h. **Correct errors:** If sociologists become aware of errors or inconsistencies following the publication of their scientific findings, they shall take all necessary steps to rectify them by means of correction, retraction, erratum or other appropriate means of publication. If the errors lead to a publication being retracted or corrected, they will work to ensure that this is done as quickly as possible and is marked accordingly.
- i. **Participate in quality control:** Sociologists also take their commitment to good science as a collective good seriously when they participate in the assessment, review and evaluation of the research achievements of others. They do not found and support journals that undermine quality control ("predatory journals").

#### **4. Principles for research with human subjects and the rights of research participants**

Research must always respect the (legally regulated) personal rights of those involved in studies, including the right to decide freely whether to participate in research projects. As a rule, the vote of an ethics committee must be obtained for research involving human subjects. However, a regulated procedure for appealing against ethics committee decisions should also be available.

Obtaining a vote from an ethics committee can be omitted if a self-assessment according to the rules below clearly shows that the research is ethically benign. The key principle here is

that the research process should only involve potential harm or risks that remain within the bounds of what is normal in participants' everyday lives.<sup>4</sup> In case of doubt, discussion with unbiased colleagues should be sought.

- a. **Anticipating negative consequences:** Participation in research projects can lead to unfavorable consequences or risks for the individuals involved. Negative outcomes could also jeopardize scientists' future access to a research population. Sociologists should anticipate both eventualities to the best of their ability when assessing the commensurability of their research design.
- b. **Welfare and dignity of subjects:** Researchers shall take all appropriate measures to ensure the safety and well-being of persons participating in their research and shall seek to eliminate risks to them. For example, participants have the right to be protected from questions, situations or interventions that could cause them physical, psychological, social or economic harm or that are overly intrusive (e.g. in experimental research). The possible social and psychological consequences for participants of publishing research results must also be considered.
- c. **Informed consent based on coherent information:** An essential principle when collecting personal data is informed consent, which is founded on providing appropriate and honest information to potential research participants about the institute conducting the research and, where applicable, the commissioning parties, the objectives of the research project, the conditions for participation (e.g. voluntariness, incentives), the measures taken to protect participants' personal rights (e.g. anonymization), the planned archiving and any subsequent use of the data. Explicit consent to participate in the research must then be obtained. Exceptions are possible, for example if it can be assumed that participants will not suffer any harm or discomfort that goes beyond everyday experiences, or if specific clarifications are likely to distort highly socially relevant research results.<sup>5</sup>
- d. **Data protection and preservation of anonymity:** Confidential information received from research participants must be treated accordingly. Careful precautions must be taken to ensure that re-identification or access to the data by unauthorized persons is not possible. This obligation applies to all members of a research group as well as to subsequent users. The responsibility for the confidential handling of data, including providing relevant information, must be clearly regulated in advance by the project leadership.
- e. **Forward-looking publication strategies:** In order to minimize the need for research with human subjects and its resulting burdens, it is advisable to disseminate research findings widely. In this regard, it is sensible to determine early on whether the project's ethical standards correspond to those of the journals or organizations where results are intended to be published.
- f. **Responsibility for qualificatory work:** Research for qualification purposes (for example in the form of student research projects) is also subject to these obligations for ethical

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<sup>4</sup> A questionnaire in the context of the WZB's "Research Ethics Policy and Procedures" from 2016, which is printed in the recommendations of the RatSWD (RatSWD 2017), provides useful pointers as to when an ethics committee should be involved.

<sup>5</sup> Details on considerations regarding informed consent and its implementation can be found in the appendix.

assessment. Supervising (teaching) staff are responsible for ensuring that professional ethical clarification takes place where necessary.

## 5. Professional, respectful interaction with colleagues

Sociologists are fair and collegial in their working relations. This includes clearly and transparently regulating individual responsibilities for project work and complying with standards of good scientific practice. Students and other junior researchers are adequately supervised and trained in research ethics.

- a. **Regulating responsibilities:** In collaborative projects, agreement should be reached at the beginning of the project regarding the distribution of tasks, remuneration, data access, appropriate documentation and archiving of data and project materials, copyrights and other rights and responsibilities. Such agreements should be accepted by all project team members and can be corrected by mutual agreement if conditions change during the course of the project. The project leader bears overall responsibility for the honest organization, implementation, completion and documentation of the project. Project members are accordingly responsible for their sub-tasks.
- b. **No bias:** When reviewing and assessing scientific papers and funding proposals and when preparing expert reports, possible biases and conflicts of interest must be identified and their relevance assessed. If there are serious conflicts of interest in accordance with the DFG's guidelines on conflicts of interest, participation in the relevant activities should be avoided. In the case of minor biases, participation in the procedural steps affected by the bias should be avoided.
- c. **Objective, scientific assessments:** Evaluations of research achievements are to be carried out without personal or ideological prejudices in a reasonable time, carefully and confidentially in an objective, constructive and appreciative style. The evaluation is based on scientific criteria. If the starting or general conditions obviously vary greatly, they should, however, be given appropriate consideration in comparative assessments.
- d. **Organizing of peer review:** Anonymous review procedures (double blind peer review) should be used as a measure against possibly unconscious distortions of judgments. Editors ensure that procedures are fair and transparent. If other methods are chosen (e.g. open assessments), it is necessary to carefully examine whether and how they can ensure that assessments are based on scientifically recognized criteria.
- e. **Open award and allocation procedures:** When awarding positions, offices, prizes and publication opportunities, attention must be paid to open, transparent procedures and fair, objective evaluations. This refers, for example, to openly accessible advertising in the usual media for this purpose that should state the evaluation criteria. This also applies to the compilation of anthologies and handbooks.
- f. **Adequate support:** Sociologists are committed to providing the best possible support to the students and young researchers entrusted to them. They promote the development of their supervisees' research questions and convey content and the current state of research in teaching as objectively and free of their own political world views as possible. Supervisors only accept as many students and young researchers as

they can adequately supervise. Ideally, mutual expectations and commitments are recorded transparently in supervisory agreements.

- g. **Training in research ethics:** In addition to theoretical and empirical skills, students and junior scientists are to be taught a basic ethical attitude for scientific work.

### **Final provisions and entry into force**

This Code of Ethics lives from its constant discussion and application by sociologists. Every member of the Academy of Sociology is required to align their own behavior with this Code and to demand the corresponding scientific conduct from other scientists. Especially in cases of conflict, it is important to behave honestly, fairly, considerately and respectfully. At the same time, the Code of Ethics is intended to protect sociologists from unfair expectations and requirements that could lead them into ethical conflicts.

This Code of Ethics came into force on January 13, 2022 by resolution of the general meeting.



## Sources

When creating these ethics guidelines, we consciously orientated ourselves on existing guidelines (listed below). We adapted and supplemented these, however, to the specific needs of analytical-empirical work. This was done, because we believe that regulations should be as uniform as possible to create a level playing field for social science research and to strengthen the enforcement of ethical principles.

ALLEA – All European Academies (2017): The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity. Berlin: Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanity.

ASA (2018): [Code of Ethics](#).

DFG (2019): [Leitlinien zur Sicherung guter wissenschaftlicher Praxis. Kodex](#). Bonn: Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

DGPs (2016): [Berufsethische Richtlinien des Berufsverbandes Deutscher Psychologen e.V. und der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Psychologie e.V.](#)

DGS (2017): [Ethik-Kodex der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Soziologie \(DGS\) und des Berufsverbandes Deutscher Soziologinnen und Soziologen \(BDS\)](#).

National Committee for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences and the Humanities (NESH) (2019): [Guidelines for Research Ethics in the Social Sciences, Humanities, Law and Theology](#).

RatSWD (2017): [Forschungsethische Grundsätze und Prüfverfahren in den Sozial- und Wirtschaftswissenschaften](#). Berlin: Rat für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsdaten.

Verein für Socialpolitik (2012): [Ethikkodex des Vereins für Socialpolitik](#).

## Appendix

### 1) Details on considerations regarding informed consent and its implementation

1. Information about the research project must be designed in such a way that research participants can assess the consequences of their participation. To achieve this, all information that speaks for or against participation must be made available. At the same time, this information must be in a form that participants can process in a reasonable amount of time and must not be unduly complex. Special efforts may be required when working with individuals with more limited language and educational competencies or from different cultural backgrounds. In the case of children or people with impaired mental capacity, the consent of their legal authorized representative must also be obtained.
2. A waiver of informed consent is only permissible if it can be assumed that participating in the research will not cause harm or discomfort that exceeds everyday experiences. This can typically only be assumed if the research relates to completely anonymous questions/questionnaires, observations in public places or archive material that does not allow the people documented there to be identified. Researchers must also ensure that the objectives of the study do not expose the subjects to the risks of criminal or civil liability, financial losses, professional disadvantages or reputational damage.
3. Exceptions to informed consent may also be justified if the prior information provided to potential research participants is expected to distort research results and if these results cannot be achieved otherwise and are highly relevant to society (e.g. in field experiments). Such exceptions usually have to be clarified with an ethics committee before a study is conducted. Researchers must check in advance whether the research objective cannot be achieved otherwise and whether the results of the research really justify the ethically dubious action, for example through the acquisition and dissemination of key findings. The anonymity of the research participants must be particularly strictly maintained in such cases.
4. Deceptions (false or incomplete information) about the true objectives of the study are only justified in rare individual cases if a significant gain in knowledge is expected that cannot be achieved through alternative approaches. In addition, deceptions must not cause serious physical or psychological stress. Research participants should be informed after data collection if possible (“debriefing”) and they must then be allowed to withdraw the data they provided.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In experimental economic research, deceiving participants about the aims of an experiment violates professional ethics; such studies are therefore not publishable. In psychology, such experiments are considered justifiable in strictly regulated exceptional cases. The Academy of Sociology follows the assessment processes proposed by the German Psychological Association (Federation of German Psychological Associations GbRs 2016) and at the same time strongly advises involving the relevant ethics committees.

## 2) Example of a declaration of consent form (source: DGPs 2016)

### Voluntariness

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time and without giving any reason. If you do so, you will not suffer any penalties. Even if you leave the study prematurely, you are entitled to a pro-rata payment or the total number of subject hours for the time spent up to that point. You can withdraw your consent to the storage of your data until the end of data collection without suffering any penalties.

### Data protection

Since no personal data are collected, it is generally not possible to link the data in the data record to you personally once data collection has been completed. The final data record is anonymous. This means that once data collection has been completed, we can no longer identify your personal data record and therefore can no longer delete it.

### Use of the anonymized data

The results and data of this study will be published as scientific publications. Publication will be in anonymized form, i.e. it will not be possible to identify the data provided by any specific individual. The completely anonymized data from this study will be made available as open data on the Internet in a data archive called \_\_\_\_\_.

This study thus follows the recommendations of the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the German Psychological Society (DGPs) for quality assurance in research.

I hereby confirm that I have understood the participant information described above and that I agree to the conditions of participation.