

Evaluation of the Ethical Guidelines for COMPLEXITY by the project's Ethical Board

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OVERALL EVALUATION

The “Annex 2: Ethical Guidelines for Good Practice in COMPLEXITY 101043382 – Version 1.1” (hereafter referred to as the “Ethical Guidelines”) are well prepared, discussed in detail, and are linked to overarching ‘ethical standards’ such as the “American Anthropological Association’s Statement On Ethics”, “Global Code of Conduct for Research in Resource-Poor Institutions” (TRUST), the “International Committee of Medical Journal Editors” (ICMJE), and the “European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity”. Moreover, the Ethical Guidelines follow the principle and guidelines for good scientific practice given by the National Research Ethics Committees (www.forskningssetikk.no/en/) and the procedures and rules for the collection and treatment of personal data provided by the Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (SIKT; www.sikt.no/en/home). As the project seeks approval from SIKT, we do not evaluate the part of the Ethical Guidelines related to how personal data are dealt with in the project. Furthermore, the Ethical Guidelines are dynamic, as they will be updated and revised as needed during the project (e.g., if unforeseen situations arise, fieldwork takes place in other regions, etc.).

SPECIFIC EVALUATION

Human participants

The project emphasizes the fair and respectful treatment of human participants. The research protocols describing how the researchers will engage with herders and veterinarians regarding cooperation among herders and animal health show respect for individuals, communities, different knowledges and values, and focus on trust-building between the researchers and participants, through, among other things, clearly communicating the research and making sure that the participants understand their rights and the implications of their involvement. In particular, the project includes careful consideration of the complexities of conducting research with impoverished, marginalized, or stigmatized groups, including those with low levels of formal education and alphabetic literacy. Representing a diversity of herders and veterinarians when selecting participants will also be important. We do suggest that the researchers consider reducing the length of their interview guide(s) in the animal health study, especially the guide addressed to herders. In addition to condensing the interview guide (i.e., reducing the number of questions and thus the expected duration of the interview), we encourage the researchers to consider only keeping personal questions that are explicitly needed for the study aims (e.g., reconsider questions relating to specificities regarding marriages, where children go to school and questions relating to other potentially sensitive aspects such as heard size etc.). Finally, going forward it will be important to plan to give back knowledge to the participants, when the research results are in.

Ethical Guidelines for Conducting Research in a Mongolian Context

The project considers important issues surrounding respect for local culture and traditions in Mongolia. Participating researchers have demonstrated good knowledge of Mongolian customs,

traditions, and social norms, and are expected to engage with local communities with cultural sensitivity and avoid actions that may be perceived as disrespectful.

The project has adequately considered issues surrounding informed consent, with the researchers emphasizing the need to obtain informed consent from all participants and ensuring they fully understand the research purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits. Consent will be voluntary, and participants will have the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. The researchers emphasize they will maintain transparency throughout the research process. They will communicate the research goals, methods, and findings to the communities under study, emphasizing accountability and addressing any concerns or feedback from participants and stakeholders. This is particularly important in Mongolia, where the researchers will be staying with local pastoral households for extended periods. The project also emphasizes ethical fieldwork and research that strives to provide tangible benefits or contributions, such as sharing knowledge, providing resources, or supporting local initiatives, and ensuring that the community perceives the research as valuable.

Finally, the project demonstrates knowledge of all local laws, regulations, and guidelines governing research in Mongolia. The researchers will seek necessary permissions from local authorities and institutions before commencing research activities and have shown competence based on previous projects. By following these guidelines, the Reviewers agree that the researchers will conduct ethical and respectful anthropological research that honours and benefits the Mongolian communities they study.

Economic Games

At the outset, an important point to emphasize is that the usefulness of economic games for comparative, cross-cultural research is the standardized implementation of methods. For the economic games to be valid comparative measures of cooperative tendencies, the experimental research design must be implemented as faithfully as possible from one study population to another. At the same time, there are many possible differences to consider in cross-cultural contexts, ranging from the language used to frame the experiment to complex social dynamics among the participants and the researchers. Among anthropologists and other social scientists, there are also considerations about the extent to which the research goals are communicated to the participants, as this disclosure may influence their behaviour during the experiment. This project keenly exhibits sensitivities to those considerations. Relevant literature was cited in the proposal, and the implementation of the experimental methods is consistent with international standards. In other words, there is seemingly nothing in the research design that departs from the methods used in numerous other study contexts, including work with marginalized and vulnerable populations. The proposal is noteworthy, meanwhile, for its data management plan and the special care given to anonymising the data collected as part of this study. Given that this study would probably be characterized as “low-risk” by most ethical review boards in the United States, the care given to the data management in this project is remarkable and commendable.

Statistical and theoretical modelling

The development of models and use of quantitative methods are well ‘problematized’: e.g., the Ethical Guidelines show what can make Agent-Based Models (ABMs) ethically problematic and how measures can be implemented to reduce such negative aspects of using models as tools in social research. Under Work Package 4 (“The evolution of political complexity: from small-scale cooperative groups to empires”), the guidelines present a list of 13 ethical checkpoints applied when using ABMs in the project (with reference to Anzola et al. 2022). These checkpoints cover, e.g., authorship, stakeholder involvement, model use, openness and transparency relating to the code, input, assumptions and representation of groups and people in the models. This list addresses

ethical concerns to an excellent degree. This, in combination with the dynamic nature of the Ethical Guidelines, as “it [ethics process] is a work in progress open for revisions and discussion during the lifetime of the project”. The project has adopted a high ethical standard using models and other quantitative methods.

CONCLUSION

The ethics component of this project is exemplary. The project’s Ethical Guideline is a comprehensive document that shows a high degree of reflection and sets a high standard for making sound ethical judgments. The project demonstrates a thorough commitment to informed consent, ensuring participants fully know the study’s objectives. It also uses appropriate methods, highlights potential risks and benefits, and adequately emphasizes voluntary participation of research subjects. This is particularly critical in the context of ethnographic fieldwork with human subjects. The project outlines robust measures for protecting privacy and maintaining confidentiality, showing a clear plan for handling sensitive data responsibly. The proposal also includes detailed strategies for minimizing potential harm while maximizing benefits, reflecting a solid adherence to ethical principles.

Besides the detailed and specific judgements, the Ethical Guidelines specifically state that the document “should be considered as a work in progress open for revisions and discussion during the lifetime of the project” and that the “ethics processes should be ongoing, iterative, and understood as a process rather than merely as a bureaucratic procedure”. In our opinion, this encourages the development of a culture within the project that promotes a high degree of awareness of ethical concerns through discussions, and such a dynamic ethics process includes detailed plans on how to deal with ethics in the planning phase and the possibility to update and revise the guideline if necessarily (e.g., if unforeseen situations arise). This also ensures a high standard when carrying out the project—spanning through all project activities, e.g., planning the fieldwork, processing collected data, and publishing the results.

The involvement of an institutional review board and the transparent, accountable approach further underscore the project’s dedication to conducting ethically sound research.

Sigrid Engen signed on the 26th of June 2024 on behalf of Bård-Jørgen Bårdsen, Jeremy M. Koster, Jennifer Hays and Richard Fraser

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sigrid Engen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Sigrid" on the top line and "Engen" on the bottom line.