

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

Bård-Jørgen Bårdesen¹, Sigrid Engen², Jeremy M. Koster³, Jennifer Hays⁴, and Richard Fraser⁵

¹Norwegian Institute for Nature Research (NINA), Tromsø, Norway (bjb@nina.no).

²NINA, Tromsø, Norway (sigrid.engen@nina.no).

³ Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (jeremy_koster@eva.mpg.de).

⁴UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Department of Social Sciences, Tromsø, Norway (jennifer.hays@uit.no).

⁵UiT The Arctic University of Norway, Department of Social Sciences, Tromsø, Norway (richard.a.fraser@uit.no).

OVERALL EVALUATION

The “Annex 2: Ethical Guidelines for Good Practice in COMPLEXITY 101043382 – Version 1.3” (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 principles 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, which also includes an assessment of data minimalization (i.e., not collecting or storing unnecessary data), 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 is 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

We do not find any new concerns regarding human participants, and remain convinced by the descriptions of the research protocols and how the researchers will engage with herders and other research participants. In this report, we address the two new project descriptions that have started within the past year, both in Africa. Both of these outline the ways that they will build trust with participants, communicate their research, and address the complexities of work with impoverished, marginalized, or stigmatized groups, including those with low levels of literacy.

In the previous report, we suggested 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.). In addition, concerning project participants that chose to not be anonymized, we advise the researchers to be explicit about potential risks. Potentially, researchers might even decide to anonymize these participants in cases where they think participants haven’t fully understood risks (e.g. if they get information through participant observations about conflicts in the area where participants are involved). 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 an African Context

The project has carefully considered the risks of research in the African countries that it will operate in, Rwanda and Cameroon. The participating researchers are from the countries in which they are researching, Rwanda (PhD student Niyonsaba) and Cameroon (Post-doc Hamidou) and are familiar not only with the local culture and traditions in general, but also with the specific cultural and environmental context of herding, which is the focus of the project. Both have received research permits from the respective countries and have demonstrated a clear understanding of the laws and requirements of the governments.

Both researchers have clearly outlined the necessary considerations regarding voluntary consent and the right of participants to withdraw at any time without repercussions. They have emphasized that they will maintain transparency throughout the research process, and 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.

Of particular relevance to the African context are concerns about research in resource-poor settings, which are carefully articulated in the ethical guidelines for the project. The guidelines highlight the importance of 'heightened sensitivity' during research planning and implementation in such settings, including in the obtaining of informed consent for participation. Barriers to understanding relating to language and literacy will be alleviated by the use of paid interpreters from the local communities (as stated in the guidelines). In Cameroon the post-doc will also be filming, which entails specific ethical considerations. He has clearly outlined the methods by which he will obtain informed consent from his participants. This researcher has extensive experience in both filmmaking and working with the vulnerable minority group that is the focus of this project, and has taken great care in outlining the manner in which he will obtain informed consent and maintain ethical relations with the community. While the ethics guidelines state that : "Care will be taken to avoid reinforcing the marginalization of Mbororo groups [...].", we advise the researcher to be more explicit about what could potentially reinforce marginalization and how can it be avoided, as film is a powerful medium.

Finally, the ethical concerns related to health are well elaborated, and the importance of precautions in an African setting is clearly articulated. Zoonotic pathogens are a concern in Asia and other parts of the world, but many have a higher level of occurrence in Africa, and the project recognizes that precautions must be taken to avoid increasing risk of exposure for participants as well as researchers. The risk of malaria in rural areas is also highlighted, and precautions for protecting the health of researchers are outlined.

Ethical Guidelines for Conducting Research in a Mongolian Context

The project addresses critical issues related to respecting local culture and traditions in Mongolia. Participating researchers have demonstrated a good understanding of Mongolian customs, traditions, and social norms, and have demonstrated ethical engagement with local communities with cultural sensitivity, avoiding 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 is voluntary, and participants have the right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. The researchers have shown transparency throughout the research process. They have communicated 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 have been 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.

Ultimately, the project demonstrates a thorough understanding of all local laws, regulations, and guidelines governing research in Mongolia. The researchers have sought necessary permissions from local authorities and institutions before commencing research activities, and have shown competence based on previous projects. By following these guidelines, the Ethical Board agree that the researchers are conducting ethical and respectful anthropological research that honours and benefits the Mongolian communities they study.

Economic Games

The previous report highlighted the significant care taken in the project to provide a data management plan, and to ensure the anonymization of data collected in economic games. We do not find any additional problems in this round of review and remain convinced about the usefulness of economic games, and the ability of the project researchers to approach these in a culturally sensitive manner. In the African context, as noted above, both the ethical guidelines for the project and the ethics submissions of the researchers clearly outline the ways that they will communicate the experiment in these particular cultural contexts.

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

As stated in the previous report, the ethics component of this project is exemplary. We do not find any additional concerns that need to be addressed, other than the evaluation of the African research, which had not started yet when we conducted the previous review. The Ethical Guideline is a comprehensive, highly reflective document that sets high standards for making ethical judgments in cross-cultural contexts, particularly for research involving human subjects. The researchers themselves have shown sensitivity and deep understanding of their local field sites and the populations, and have carefully outlined the measures they will take to protect privacy, maintain confidentiality, and handle sensitive data. The Ethical Guidelines also demonstrate recognition for the risk of harm, including to health from diseases that are prevalent in those regions, and identify precautions to avoid it.

The revisions to the Ethical Guidelines over the past year, following the addition of a new postdoctoral researcher and a new PhD student to the project, demonstrate that the project takes a dynamic approach to ethics and ethical considerations (e.g., adding more information about data minimalization based on the last year’s assessment by the Ethical Board). Both the methodological expansion and the fact that data will now be collected in two African countries further underline

this. It is clear that COMPLEXITY takes ethics seriously and that it constitutes an integral part of the project's implementation.

Date: June 30th 2025

Signature: Sigrid Engen, on behalf of the ethics committee (Bård-Jørgen Bårdsen, Jeremy M. Koster, Jennifer Hays, Richard Fraser and undersigned)

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