Graduate School of Social Sciences (GSSS), University of Amsterdam

Ethical Guidelines for Student Research

In force since start of academic year 2019/20. Last adapted in June 2021.

Note: Different teaching programmes within the GSSS may have additional regulations in place. Information about those is available in the programmes' Thesis (Fieldwork) Manuals.

The purpose of this document is to provide students and their supervisors with support for ethical reflection upon students' research plans, for the master's theses or other research projects. It is based on the AISSR Integrity Protocol and Ethical Procedure and Questions documents (2017) and the hitherto used "CSS and GSSS Guidelines for the Ethical Review of Research Conducted by Students" (2012).

In the first part of this document, academic integrity is defined. Its principles should guide all GSSS students' conduct during the whole process of their studies, and ideally beyond. The second part of the document offers a list of questions to help students to think through their research plan and complete the ethical reflection section or chapter of their paper or thesis. The third part describes the procedure for obtaining ethical clearance for a student research project, in cases where this is required by the degree programme. The fourth and final part describes the procedure for acquiring permission for fieldwork or research work placements outside of the Netherlands, in cases where this is required by the degree programme.

I.   Academic Integrity

The Netherlands Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2018), which the UvA endorses, breaks academic integrity down into five core principles: honesty, scrupulousness, transparency, independence (impartiality), and responsibility. Although these principles ought to be integral to the conduct of every researcher, this is not always the case; they are sometimes violated in various ways: by introducing fabricated or falsified data, secretly omitting certain findings, plagiarising and wrongly presenting oneself as an author, intentionally misusing methods or misinterpreting results, being culpably careless in the conduct of research or permitting and concealing the misconduct of other researchers. None of these practices are acceptable for our students or staff in any way, shape, or form.

For student research projects, in particular, five issues related to academic integrity are most relevant: [1]

1. Scientific Fraud

Scientific fraud is understood as conscious deception in the form of cheating and misrepresentation of research procedures or results of research. This may involve not only serious manipulation of data or results but also "subtler" forms such as reporting empirical results consistent with one's findings and arguments, while being aware of but not reporting less favourable results.

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[1] For elaboration on these topics, please refer to the AISSR Integrity Protocol on which this section is based.

2. Plagiarism[2]

Plagiarism is a form of scientific fraud that concerns use or reproduction of another person's text, data (including audio, visual and other forms of material), code or ideas without properly acknowledging the source. Plagiarism may not only take a form of conscious deception (e.g., presenting someone else's work as one's own) but also negligence (e.g., failure to clearly indicate quoted or paraphrased text, material, ideas etc.). This means that you should take great care to indicate direct quotations properly and to provide full information on your sources wherever in your work you rely on the work of others. The requirement to acknowledge intellectual indebtedness to others applies to non-academic sources, too. "Submitting papers obtained from a commercial agency or written (whether or not for payment) by another person"[3] is also considered to be plagiarism.

3. Self-citation Standards

Students may build their research upon their own previously published work. In such instances, though, they must properly indicate that this is the case, so as to avoid "self-plagiarism." If you want to build on some of your own earlier non-published work, such as older term papers, this must be discussed with your supervisor and should in any case be minimized.

4. Conflicts of Interest

Conflict of interest occurs when a student has relationships or allegiances external to the given project that may make them steer the research towards a particular outcome. These relationships may be of several kinds: economic, political or even personal. Their sole existence, nonetheless, does not imply that the project cannot be conducted at all. Rather, it is important to recognize that such affiliations and normative priors might affect one's results and to take steps to ensure that empirical work can yield findings beyond or against such priors. Hence, where relevant, the student should be transparent and explicit about such possible conflicts of interest, in the direction of full disclosure.

5. Making Your Data Available

Practices to prevent and identify fraud in empirical research and the need for replicability require information about and, where possible, access to the data used in research. However, for various practical and ethical reasons, making data available is not always possible. The AISSR thus advises you to follow the motto "open when possible, closed when necessary." More information about the broader topic of research data management can be found at this site. See also section V below on data storage.

Supervisors may ask you to make data available, for example as an appendix to your thesis, and you should be prepared to explain why any given data cannot be disclosed. At the same time, you have the responsibility to protect your sources where necessary, for example by anonymizing interview subjects when they have so requested, or when making their identities public may lead to their coming to harm. Making decisions about which data to disclose and which not, may be difficult. When in doubt, it is important to discuss these questions with your supervisor. (See also section II.3.)

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[2] In addition to the AISSR Integrity Protocol, this section draws from the UvA's Regulations Governing Fraud and Plagiarism for UvA Students. Please refer to this document for details, binding definitions and regulations currently in place.
[3] Regulations Governing Fraud and Plagiarism for UvA Students, article 3h.

And what happens to your own papers and theses?

We employ a plagiarism check with designated software. Usually, when you are asked to submit a paper, and certainly when you are asked to submit your master thesis, you are asked to submit it via this software (which is integrated with our electronic teaching platform Canvas). The software stores your work within its database. However, their terms of operation stipulate that the data in this database can be used only for purposes of future plagiarism checks (for example, to see whether someone else rips off your thesis in the future). Your thesis does not in this way end up in the public domain. After graduation, theses are also stored digitally in the administrative archives for accreditation purposes (this is required for seven years) and, if you give express permission, also in the UvA library (public domain). However, you keep the intellectual property right over your own work. This also means that there are no problems with presenting (parts of) our thesis or paper at a conference, or even publishing (parts of) it. Please note, however, that you need consent for this further use of data by your data subjects (if relevant).

II.   **Questions for Ethical Reflection**

The following list of questions comes from the [AISSR support document for ethical review of research plans](). Its purpose is not to provide the student with a standard form to be filled in and submitted, although different degree programs inside the GSSS may well use such a form, especially if ethical approval or clearance is needed for a third party. Nor are all the questions necessarily relevant for each project. Rather, the list offers a structure for reflection upon your research plan. You should discuss these questions in a one-on-one conversation with your supervisor early on in the process. You can also use them to write a section on research ethics, if that is required as a part of a research proposal or final thesis.

1. Who and what to study

1a. Approaching people

Social science research frequently involves working with informants, participants or interviewees – and their rights are to be respected. How will you recruit these people? Will you be working through other institutions (e.g., healthcare facilities, schools)? If so, how will you make clear your relative independence from these institutions (so that they will not treat those who participate in your research differently from those who do not)? Are you thinking of handing out money or other rewards for participation in your research? If so, why? What consequences will this have? What alternatives might there be? What other issues of decent conduct will arise at this point and how will you handle them?

1b. Not neglecting people

If in your research you work with publicly available data, if you study built environments, infrastructures or practices (e.g. mobility patterns, neighbourhood dynamics), or if otherwise you do not directly depend on people and their willingness to talk with you: how will you still incorporate in your work respect for the interests and concerns of those whose lives your work may affect?

How do your research questions address, reflect on, critique or otherwise relate to the concerns of the various people to whom your research pertains? How do your concerns map onto or clash with those of relevant others?

How will you explain your research and its purposes not only to social scientists but to the people it concerns or affects?

1c. Privacy concerns when working with personal data

When working with people as your research subject, you need to ensure their privacy. The legal part of this is laid down in the [General Data Protection Regulation]() (GDPR, European Legislation). In a nutshell, the following is stipulated in and/or derived from the GDPR:

- GDPR regulation is only relevant if processing of data concerns personal data (any information related to an identified of identifiable person).
- Processing personal data is generally prohibited, unless it is expressly allowed by law, or the data subject has consented to the processing.
- Only process data for the purpose that it was intended for and consented to. Consent forms ought to be used and ought to include explicit permission to a) use data for analysis, b) publish data, c) store data for a certain time, d) period of right of withdrawal of their data by the subject, and d) sharing data with supervisor.
    - o   If the supervisor needs to be able to see the data (see above), this needs to be known to data subjects beforehand.

- o Data subjects have a right to withdrawal. It would be wise to put this in the agreements with a deadline (a month after participation?), because otherwise you may end up with quotes in already 'published' theses that cannot be removed.
- Data should be anonymized (not only taking out names etc., but also making sure that data can lead back to individuals in no other way).
- Data need to be stored safely, meaning: encrypted, locked away. Only use cloud services provided by UvA.
- Contact data and content data (such as interviews) should be stored separately.
- Raw data should be removed as soon as possible.
- Data should be removed when no longer needed. In a normal setting for a student, this period would end with the student's graduation (to be discussed with supervisor).
- Online data collection ought to preferably be done by platforms/apps with UvA licences (MS teams, zoom) and/or data agreements. Do not use Whatsapp or Facebook Messenger.
- Personal data storage is only allowed with third parties when the UvA has a data agreement with this external party. Do not use Slack, Dropbox or Googledocs.

2. Relating your research back to the social world

2a. Impact on people

Will your information gathering have the potential to harm people? If so, do you intend to protect your research subjects/informants (etc.) against the potential negative consequences of their participation? If so, how? If not, why not? This may become pressing in situations where your informants are 'undercover' (e.g., illegal) and/or where states or other organisations are at least as curious about them as you are. What kinds of risk-reducing measures will you take? What other harms might there be in store for them, and how will you avoid and/or reduce these harms? If you are not sure you can avoid harm, does your goal merit the risks?

2b. Establishing ground rules with your research subjects

Will you ask people for their consent to be researched? If so, what exactly will you ask them to consent to? At what stage in the process? What about your research procedure or the use of your research will you share with them or leave open? If you would like to ask for signatures on forms, do you think that it is indeed wise: what kind of burden might that represent for them, and is that burden warranted? If you want to work with forms, which shape do you give these? If paperwork is not opportune in the settings where you will be working, in which other way will you show you are respectful or provide guarantees?

Will you guarantee anonymity? How will you ensure it? By using pseudonyms in note taking or in reports and/or by altering relevant details about people in your texts? Providing anonymity may come at the cost of a lack of openness about your sources. Is that relevant in your case? If so, how do you intend to handle this tension? What do you do when people want to have their names used? Or when they are public figures whose identity cannot be hidden?

2c. Tough cases

What extra safeguards will you use if your research subjects/informants are minors, or otherwise in a more vulnerable position, or are less able to understand what is going on?

Will you find yourself in a situation where you are passively observing, so that your research subjects might not be aware that you are doing research? If so, how will you still work towards decency, fairness, and safety for yourself and your research subjects?

And if you will not directly face and talk with the people to whom your research pertains, how will you attend to their interests and concerns?

2d. Beyond establishing ground rules

Your responsibility does not end with shifting decisions and choices to your research subjects/informants. How will you avoid or reduce the risk that your research process will harm them? That is, what will you do to protect your research subjects/informants against the potential negative consequences of their participation? What might such negative consequences be?

How will you protect yourself and other researchers and research assistants involved against potential negative consequences of the research process? Situations of illegality come to mind here. But the risks may also be social (e.g., being confronted with violence) or mental/psychological. If this is relevant in your case, what kind of personal and emotional preparations and support will you organise for yourself and other researchers (assistants, fellow students, etc.)?

3. After assembling your data

3a. Data storage

How will you deal with the materials you have assembled? How will you store/archive them so that they are protected against theft (e.g., using encryption and/or password protection)?[4] How long after completing your thesis will you store your data (see also GDPR regulations at 1c)?[5]

3b. Data accessibility

Once you have data, there may be tensions here between keeping these hidden to ensure the privacy of respondents/informants or sharing them with fellow researchers and/or other publics. How will you balance keeping sensitive issues from inquisitive eyes with proving enough openness to assure others of the truthfulness of your results? In other words, how will you handle the potential tension between the ethical ideal of data protection and the integrity ideal of data sharing?

If you intend to open up your data, when will you do so – immediately, or after a certain embargo time? Will others be able and invited to use them? Will you also preserve your data for later reuse (e.g., after a few decades)? Did your data subjects consent to sharing the data and/or later use thereof? Will you have to approach them again? Or will it be better in your case to destroy your raw materials so that the original research subjects/informants are better protected, or for another reason (if so, which reason)? Here, the same tensions arise but, as the timeline is longer, specificities may change. In all cases, the GDPR regulations apply (see 1c).

3c. Analysing data

How will you work with the data you gather? How will you do justice to them, both in the sense of bringing out true results and in that of attending to relevant concerns?

4. Writing up the thesis (or research paper)

4a. Communicating your choices

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[4] In principle, students ought to store their research data on the Onedrive at UvA. Sharing with supervisors is also possible this way. If you are on fieldwork and internet connectivity is a problem, store your data on an encrypted laptop (using bitlocker on Windows / filevault on Mac); if necessary, to lower the risk of data loss make a backup on an external encrypted harddisk. Remove the data from these devices as soon as possible and move them to Onedrive. Please note that your OneDrive will be deleted automatically after your graduation/disenrollment. If students choose to store the data (also) elsewhere, the responsibility to comply with GDPR regulations (see 1c.) lies with the (former) student. Please also note that in the case of research for/with a third party (for example during an internship), other agreements pertaining to data storage and (re)use may apply.

[5] More information on correct data collection, collaboration and storage can be found in the FMG manual. It is directed at staff, not all options are available to students, but students can discuss these issues with their supervisor.

How will you explain and lay out the methods that you used to gather, treat and analyse your data? What, in your case, are the relevant ethical issues in this context?

4b. Your audience

Where, when and for whom will you write? Where do you think your work should be circulated and in which language(s)? How does this relate to your concerns, to the concerns of your research subjects/informants, and/or to what is relevant in the practices that you studied?

4c. Implications of your findings

How will you ensure, overall, that your research products will be good in the ethical sense of the word? Are you sure that they will not harm those who have put their trust in you? Have you considered what might happen to your results, what others might do with them? Have you taken into account what role you might play in this? If you want to express criticism, will your criticism be clearly directed, well-argued, and respectful of the individuals concerned?

III.   Procedure for Obtaining Ethical Clearance for a Student Research Project

Sometimes, research may get you into dangerous situations. If you feel that you are in any sort of danger (physically or emotionally), or if you feel that it might be better to conceal your purpose or identity – get out of that situation immediately! If you cannot be honest about who you are and what you are doing without feeling at risk, you are doing something wrong. Stop it, and get in touch with your supervisor to talk about how to adjust your work and get back onto safe ground.

GSSS degree programmes may decide to ask students to obtain ethical clearance for a research project. If this is the case, the following procedure applies.

Ethical review and clearance of research conducted by students

If a proposed research project (research proposal) fails to comply with the ethical standards presented in this and the referenced documents, the GSSS degree programme may reject it. Approval must always be granted by the supervising lecturer or thesis supervisor. Supervisors have the authority to veto certain topics and types of research based on the principles expressed here. (For example, your supervisor may not want to you to interview traumatized children if you do not have the proper skills in order to prevent their being harmed by your research.) The lecturer/supervisor is the person who can give ethical clearance, based on having been declared competent to do so by the Examinations Board. It is then the responsibility of the student to behave in line with the terms of the clearance in all phases of the research. In the event of doubt whether a proposed research project is ethically justified, the lecturer/supervisor may first consult a colleague, the director of the relevant AISSR research programme group, or the programme director. In the event of continuing doubt, or if the lecturer/supervisor and the student fail to reach a mutually agreed solution, the proposed research project will be submitted to the Examinations Board for review. If the Examinations Board is unable or unwilling to make a judgement, or if the student or lecturer lodge an objection against the proposed decision of the Examinations Board, the Examinations Board will submit the research proposal to the AISSR Ethics Committee for advice. Based on the advice issued by the AISSR Ethics Committee, the Examinations Board will decide after consulting the GSSS director. An appeal may then be brought against the decision of the Examinations Board, following the customary appeals procedure.

General step-by-step procedure:[6]

- The lecturer/supervisor reviews the ethical acceptability of the research proposal.
- If it is rejected, the student must revise the proposal.
- In the event of doubt, the lecturer/supervisor consults a relevant colleague.
- If doubt continues, or student and lecturer/supervisor cannot come to an agreement on the needed changes, the proposal is submitted to the Examinations Board.
- The Examinations Board reviews the research proposal and will either issue approval or a rejection.
- If the Examinations Board cannot come to a decision, of if the lecturer or the student object to the approval or rejection, the Examinations Board will submit the case to the AISSR Ethics Committee.
- Having heard (and following on from) the AISSR Ethics Committee, the Examinations Board will reach a final judgement.
- The usual appeals procedures relating to decisions of the Examinations Board apply to any further steps.

If you submit a master thesis to a programme requiring ethical clearance without having received such clearance, you have not met one of the important learning outcomes of your degree programme: awareness of your ethical responsibilities as a researcher. This means that you do not qualify for the

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[6] Please note that MCSA and MAS have a slightly different procedure for this that the supervisor will be aware of.

degree, even if your thesis exhibits no other weaknesses. In practice, it means that your thesis will not be assessed. You receive no credit for it and have to start from scratch.

Sometimes, ethical clearance is necessary in the research destination country or at the organisation where the research is to be carried out (e.g., a research permit might be required by a foreign government). It is the student's responsibility to acquire this form of external ethical clearance when required. This may entail extra cost and time.

IV.   Guidelines for Research Work Placements and Fieldwork Outside the Netherlands

As a rule, the supervising lecturer grants approval for fieldwork or research work placements outside the Netherlands as part of the degree programme. S/he has been declared competent to assess the feasibility and safety of the proposed research project abroad by the Examinations Board. In the event of doubt, approval will not be granted. In that case a new research proposal must be drawn up (with a different location for gathering data) and approved by the lecturer/supervisor. If the student disagrees with the rejection, the student may approach the Examinations Board, and the Examinations Board may overrule the lecturer/supervisor.

In any case no approval will be granted for a formal study component abroad if the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs has issued a warning 'advising against non-essential travel' for that particular country or region (a so-called "code red").[7] If the Ministry issues such a warning in the period between approval of the research proposal and the student's actual departure, the approval is considered revoked. Students are perceived to have an individual responsibility to adhere to the advice issued by the Dutch embassy (or by their country of origin, if they are non-Dutch nationals) for the relevant country or region. In cases where hardship results from such a revocation of approval (e.g., because flights have been paid for), the student may approach the GSSS International Office with a plea for extra financial support (which is, however, not guaranteed).

If a student travels abroad despite consent not having been granted, the proposed research plan will be deemed unapproved and the rights to supervision and assessment of the research project will lapse.

The student is responsible for acquiring the proper type of visa for the stay abroad, as needed.

Extracurricular stays abroad fall outside the scope of the degree programme and, in principle, will not be approved by the degree programme. This is based on the principle that a student should be available full-time to complete their degree programme within the duration defined by the relevant programme.

Step-by-step procedure:

- The lecture/supervisor and the student assess the safety-related aspects of the research destination.
- If the Ministry has issued a warning 'advising against non-essential travel', the proposal is rejected.
- In the event of doubt, the lecturer/supervisor rejects the proposal and discusses this with the student.
- If the student disagrees with the rejection (and continues to do so after discussion), the proposal may be submitted to the Examinations Board.
- The Examinations Board reviews the research proposal and will either issue approval or rejection.
- If, despite a negative decision, a student still goes ahead with the research in accordance with the rejected plan, the rights to supervision and assessment lapse.

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[7] Please note that UvA may also not support traveling to 'orange-coded' countries. For up-to-date information, please refer to the International Office of the GSSS (international-office-csw@uva.nl). For up-to-date travel advice please consult https://www.nederlandwereldwijd.nl/reizen/reisadviezen (in Dutch).

V.   Data storage: Pseudonymisation and Anonymisation (slightly adapted excerpt from FMG guidelines to store, publish and archive research data, 2021)

How data should be stored during the research process: pseudonymizing and anonymizing

When your data is stored on one of the preferred data storage locations, you should take steps to remove identifying information (e.g., name, address, phone number, email, bank account number, facial video and voice audio, handwriting, location data, IP address and other data that can be used to track down someone's identity) from your research data. This can be done in 2 ways.

Pseudonymization
Pseudonymization means replacing directly identifying information with pseudonyms (i.e., subject IDs) and storing the link between the identifying data and the pseudonym elsewhere (i.e., in a key file). Most datasets can be pseudonymized in this way; however, in some cases identifying data is a core part of the research data (e.g., studies using video data) and pseudonymization is not feasible. Datasets that cannot be pseudonymized always require extra security measures, such as encryption.

Anonymization
When directly identifying information is irreversibly destroyed rather than removed and placed elsewhere, we speak of anonymization. For a dataset to be anonymous under the GDPR it shouldn't be possible for researchers in the project, or anyone else, to re-identify subjects. Anonymization also requires evaluating whether indirect identifiers (a combination of variables that can be used to form a profile of an individual) in the dataset allow identification and taking measures to prevent that. The GDPR requires us to minimize the processing of personal data; identifying information should not be preserved without a clear purpose. Figure 1 describes different levels of anonymization; you should always strife to maximize the level of anonymization. Once fully anonymous, the GDPR no longer applies to a dataset since it is no longer considered personal data.

Following guidance is recommended as a general framework for each institutions' data protection measures. Add additional detail to each section as required.

SECTION I: What are the risk levels for re-identification of research data about people?

Identification risk level	PS0 Not pseudonymized	PS1 Pseudonymized at level 1	PS2 Pseudonymized at level 2	PS3 Pseudonymized at level 3	"ANON" Anonymized

How high is the risk of re-identification?

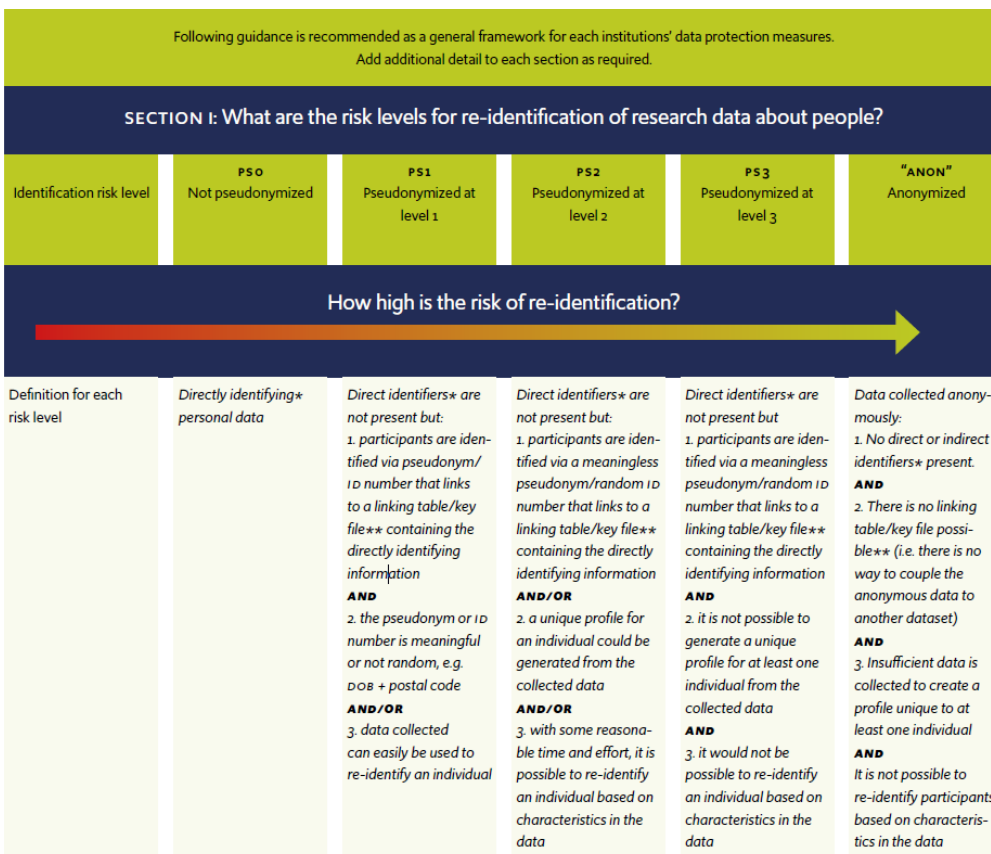| Definition for each risk level | Directly identifying* personal data | Direct identifiers* are not present but: 1. participants are identified via pseudonym/ ID number that links to a linking table/key file** containing the directly identifying information AND 2. the pseudonym or ID number is meaningful or not random, e.g. DOB + postal code AND/OR 3. data collected can easily be used to re-identify an individual | Direct identifiers* are not present but: 1. participants are identified via a meaningless pseudonym/random ID number that links to a linking table/key file** containing the directly identifying information AND/OR 2. a unique profile for an individual could be generated from the collected data AND/OR 3. with some reasonable time and effort, it is possible to re-identify an individual from characteristics in the data | Direct identifiers* are not present but 1. participants are identified via a meaningless pseudonym/random ID number that links to a linking table/key file** containing the directly identifying information AND 2. it is not possible to generate a unique profile for at least one individual from the collected data AND 3. it would not be possible to re-identify an individual based on characteristics in the data | Data collected anonymously: 1. No direct or indirect identifiers* present. AND 2. There is no linking table/key file possible** (i.e. there is no way to couple the anonymous data to another dataset) AND 3. Insufficient data is collected to create a profile unique to at least one individual AND It is not possible to re-identify participants based on characteristics in the data |

Figure 1: Levels of anonymization