

Prof. Robert Biegler
Robert.Biegler@svt.ntnu.no

Our ref.: 2012/168 Date: 28 September, 2012

Concerning “Lack of reciprocity”/“Students’ feelings of guilt”

NESH (The National Research Ethics Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities) has an advisory capacity, and does not issue formal approvals of research projects. The following constitutes NESH’ advice concerning the project “Lack of reciprocity”/“Students’ feelings of guilt”.

The project’s primary aim is to study whether students feel guilt for receiving economic support from parents. A secondary issue is how guilt affects their well-being and academic efforts. Among the relevant questions are whether they feel more guilt if they are not in a position to reciprocate, and whether guilt varies with the giver’s economic status. Do they feel more guilt when receiving support from people who are less well off?

The participants are supposed to play a computerized game where they will be manipulated to experience feelings of guilt and trust. They believe they are interacting with a random person, whereas they are really responding to a computer program. The participants start out with identical sums of money and then donate money to each other. They shift between being donors and receivers. A participant designated as rich must sacrifice less in order to reach the same result than one designated as poor. Each participant will experience receiving money from both poor and rich. Real money is utilized.

The project description lacks information which would be required in order to conclude concerning a series of potential research ethical issues. The recruitment procedure is not described. There is no exact description of which information is to be collected and stored, or of how the data are to be stored. An interview guide has not been submitted. The connection between research questions, which concern the relation students have to their parents, and method, which concerns interactions with strangers/computers, is not explained. Due to this lack of documentation, NESH cannot provide a complete evaluation, only limited advice concerning concrete aspects of the following central research ethical issues.

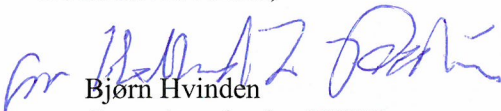
1. *Informed consent.* That the participants are deceived when it comes to what/whom they are interacting with, is not necessarily a major ethical challenge in this specific project. The population to be studied (psychology students) can in the main be expected to be acquainted with this type of research design, and the information can be considered relatively harmless. Still, it is important to include in the overall design a debriefing after the sessions, in order to provide the participants with proper information about both the lack of previous information

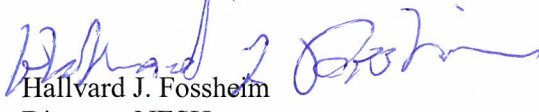
and of the rationale for withholding it. (Cf. NESH guidelines § 8.) To the extent that the following factors are relevant to the project, the written information should include facts about the connections between the varieties of stored information, the key to accessing these connections, storing of data, and deletion of data. (Cf. NESH guidelines § 9.)

2. *Voluntary consent.* The recruitment must occur in such a way that there is no relation of dependence between the recruiters and the participants. It is important that the students do not think their choice to participate or not may have any effect on their studies or situation. It should therefore be considered whether recruitment might take place by means of posters or other forms of announcement ensuring that the voluntary nature of the participation is not compromised. (Cf. NESH guidelines § 9.)
3. *Data protection.* Data that can serve to identify persons must be stored safely and for a limited period of time. (Cf. NESH guidelines § 16.)
4. *Payment.* The fact that the participants will be dealing with real money does not necessarily pose any great research ethical challenge in this specific project. The sums mentioned are fairly limited, and the group in question must be supposed to be in a situation where such sums do not exert undue pressure. It is, all the same, of importance that one avoids increasing the sums to a point where they can become a main motivation for choosing to participate.

A premise for NESH' evaluation is that NSD (Norwegian Social Science Data Services, <http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/om/english.html>) has been consulted concerning the data protection issues that might be pertinent to the project, including questions concerning consent forms and storage of data. (Cf. "personopplysningsloven", <http://www.lovdatab.no/all/hl-20000414-031.html>.)

On behalf of NESH,


Bjørn Hvinden
Committee leader, NESH


Hallvard J. Fossholm
Director, NESH