



## ETHNOGRAPHIC AND OTHER TYPES OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

The purpose of this guidance is twofold, firstly, to help researchers identify and address ethical issues relating to ethnographic and certain other types of qualitative research, and secondly, to help researchers explain their approach via the CUREC application forms. The close, and often lengthy, association of qualitative researchers with the communities/ cultures/ societies among whom they carry out research entails personal and moral relationships, trust and reciprocity between the researcher and research participants; it also entails recognition of power differentials between them<sup>1</sup>. In particular, ethnographic methods, through which theory is developed on the basis of empirical data, cover a range of research practices and methods often including long/ short-term/ multi-sited/ repeated fieldwork/ visits.

One of the prime ethical obligations of researchers is to evaluate carefully and deliberately the consequences and ethical dimensions of the choices they make — by action or inaction. While the fundamental principles of research ethics (e.g., respecting others, acting with integrity) apply just as much to qualitative research as they do to other types of research, the characteristics of qualitative research mean that a more nuanced approach to address the issues may be needed. Given the open-ended and often long-term nature of fieldwork, ethical decision-making has to be undertaken repeatedly throughout the research and in response to specific circumstances.

### *Inductive research*

Parts of the research could be informal, unstructured or open-ended, and if the research is conducted over a long period, there could be changes to the design. Participant observation is inductive and has the potential for uncovering unexpected links between different domains of social life. Accordingly, a degree of flexibility in research design that allows modification of topic focus – following the initial formulation of a research question – can often be required. Participatory action research would be another example of this. This possibility should be acknowledged within the CUREC submission. It may be difficult to prepare distinct data collection instruments or specify population samples for approval in advance, and therefore it may be more useful to explain the intended approach rather than giving detailed information about what exactly will happen. A way of dealing with uncertainty over the precise practical details of numbers and where and when research will take place is to place the focus on a rigorous account of the principles by which the research will be conducted and an account of how these principles might be applied to different situations.

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<sup>1</sup> [Association of Social Anthropologists \(ASA\) ethical guidelines](#), page 3

### *Informed consent*

Consider what would be the most appropriate method for obtaining and maintaining participants' informed consent; simply requesting and obtaining this at the start of the project might not be sufficient for longer or more complex projects. Consent forms could be collaboratively designed with those that will sign them, or participants could be asked to comment on the suitability of drafts.

Participants should be made aware of the research being carried out wherever possible and, for longer-term projects, on an ongoing basis. However, there may be situations where it is not practical to obtain informed consent from all the participants, for example, when observing a large number of people. Alternative methods, such as displaying posters to inform participants and provide them with contact details should they have questions or prefer to be excluded, should be considered, and any risks to participants, minimised. The data must be kept securely and participants should not be identifiable from any research outputs without their informed consent.

An ethics application should give a focused account of why the proposed approaches are appropriate and situate the choices in the research design and, where possible, in current debates in research ethics.

### *Relationships and professional boundaries*

The type of relationships formed with research participants and interaction with others involved in the research can be quite different from relationships with participants in other types of research. There is the potential for blurred boundaries between roles, such as between a researcher's role as a researcher and their role as a member of the community or as a volunteer; this is particularly acute for insider research. Any inequalities in relationships may be exacerbated by the length of the relationship. Think through how this might feel from the perspective of the participants and what could be done to distinguish research activities from other activities. How might this affect the participants' ability to give informed consent? Are there any additional risks to the privacy of the participants? The collection of data should be as overt as possible. Researchers should be aware of the potentially intrusive nature of some of their enquiries and methods.

### *Addressing the risk of harm*

There could be unintended or incidental consequences of the research, either to the participants as individuals, or more broadly. Researchers should be sensitive to the possible consequences of their work, endeavour to guard against predictably harmful effects and protect research participants as far as possible against any other (unpredicted and unanticipated) potential harmful effects of research.

Risks to the physical and psychological safety of the researcher(s): If the researchers are going to be away from their usual support networks and if there are cultural differences or topics that could be distressing for either the participants or the researchers, it is important that measures are put in place to support the researcher and to reduce the risk of harm.

These could include, for example, maintaining contact with support networks, taking breaks from the field site/ community and preparing through attending relevant training courses<sup>2</sup>.

### *Participants' privacy*

Privacy and confidentiality present qualitative researchers with particularly difficult problems given the cultural and legal variations between societies and the various ways in which the real interests or research role of the ethnographer may not fully be realised by some or all of the participants. In research outputs, researchers and participants should remain aware of the tension between providing the level of detailed description necessary for an in-depth understanding of the research context and revealing identifying information about that context which may lead to a breach of participant anonymity. It may be harder to de-identify participants fully because of the nature of the data that is collected or the size of the population being studied. It should also be recognised that in some contexts anonymisation is undesirable, e.g. where participants actively want their voices to be heard or where research data is understood by a community of research participants to constitute documentation of practices and lifeways that communities may wish to refer to in later generations. It may be helpful to refer to CUREC's Best Practice Guidance (03) on elite and expert interviewing<sup>3</sup>. Researchers need to be clear and consistent in participant-facing information and use straightforward language that the participants will understand. It may be clearer to explain how likely it is that they will be identifiable from the research outputs rather than using terms like 'anonymisation', 'pseudonymisation' or 'de-identification'. Refer to CUREC's Best Practice Guidance on Data Protection, Collection and Management<sup>4</sup> (BPG 09) for further guidance.

### *Respondent validation*

As well as making sure participants are aware of any limits to confidentiality and anonymity, it may be appropriate in some situations to give participants the chance to review what is being said about them (i.e. respondent validation). Separate informed consent agreements for data collection and the dissemination of the study's results may be helpful. Consider what will happen at the end of the research project. It may be appropriate to provide a summary of the research findings in a way that is appropriate for the participants and commensurate with their contribution. In longer-term research projects, the burden on participants may be greater and they may be more invested in the project than in short-term studies. Will participants and the local community be able to benefit, directly or indirectly from the research?

As with all research, it is important that the researchers weigh up the risks and benefits associated with the research, treat those involved with respect and conduct the research with integrity. Particular consideration should be given to the research design, obtaining and maintaining the participants' informed consent, the consequences of the relationships and addressing any risks of harm to those involved with, or affected by, the research.

Researchers are welcome to contact their [DREC](#) or [IDREC](#) for advice on how to address the challenges associated with the ethical issues in qualitative research.

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<sup>2</sup> [Social Science division's fieldwork resources webpage](#)

<sup>3</sup> [BPG 03 Elite and expert interviewing](#)

<sup>4</sup> [CUREC's best practice guidance documents](#)

### Further guidance

- Social Sciences' Division's [guidance on fieldwork](#)
- Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA) [Ethical Guidelines for good research practice](#)
- American Association of Geographers (AAG) [Statement on Professional Ethics](#)
- [BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research](#) (2018)
- Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) [Ethics Case Studies](#)
- NHS Health Research Authority [Consent and Participant Information Guidance](#) – 'The power of user testing and re design' section
- Social Sciences Division's [guidance and training on vicarious \(secondary\) trauma](#)
- Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford-online Vol. VII, no. 1 (2015): [Special Issue on Sexual Harassment in the Field](#)
- Example of a collaborative ethics process: Macaulay, A.C. *et al* (1998) [Participatory Research with Native Community of Kahnawake Creates Innovative Code of Research Ethics](#), *Canadian Journal of Public Health*.
- Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA) [guide/reflections on navigating ethics in ethnography](#)
- American Anthropological Association (AAA) [draft guide: what constitutes informed consent](#)
- American Anthropological Association (AAA) [draft guide: sexual relationships with participants](#)
- Reflexivity/ dealing with ethics 'in the field' and unforeseen challenges: Guillemin, M. & Gillam, L. (2004) [Ethics, Reflexivity, and "Ethically Important Moments" in Research](#), *Qualitative Inquiry*.
- Payls, T. & Lowman, J. (2012). [Defending Research Confidentiality "To the Extent the Law Allows:" Lessons From the Boston College Subpoenas](#). *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 10(4): 271–297.