

Low Risk Observation Protocol

The purpose of this protocol is to outline the ethical issues raised by the use of observation as a research methodology. The protocol will allow researchers to identify ethical issues raised by their research and to assess whether the project will be suitable for light touch or full ethics review. Please contact the ethics representative in your School/ Department or the Senior Research Ethics Administrator, <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/EthicsContacts>, for further advice.

Observational research is a widely used and valuable research methodology in a wide range of settings. It can be used as the main way in which to collect data, for example in ethnographic studies; as a supplement to data from other sources, for example to find out how the law operates in practice after having collected administrative data; and as a way of getting to know the field, for example, shadowing workers to find out what their roles entail before interviewing them. Because observational research can be carried out for different reasons in a wide range of settings, different ethical issues are raised by each project. The discussion below considers some of the principal ethical issues which may be relevant and are intended to be guidelines.

Where is the observation to take place?

Observation carried out in a public place, for example on a street raises limited ethical issues (see below for exceptions) and it is unlikely that a researcher would not need to seek permission to undertake such research. However, it would be advisable to do so, where possible.

Permission should normally be sought where observations are to be carried out:

- In a semi-public place, for example, in a shopping mall, at a football match or music event where the owner of the space is a private individual or company;
- In a private space such as a workplace, public house or nightclub.

A fieldwork risk assessment may need to be undertaken:

<http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/HealthAndSafetyAdvice>.

Consider whether there are different considerations for different locations or different groups of people being observed.

Who is being observed?

If the individuals are vulnerable, for example children, young people, older people then the ethical issues and the risk issues are more acute and it is important that the researcher seeks the relevant permissions to undertake the research even if the observations are taking place in a public place, for example outside a school or in a play park. Disclosure and Barring Service checks may be required. Do any measures need to be put in place to maintain the confidentiality of the people not directly involved in the research?

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Do I need to get the consent of the individuals being observed?

Good ethical practice is that informed consent should be sought for research. However, this may not be possible for observational research in some settings, for example, when observing crowd behaviour at a football match or in a shopping centre. There may also be sound methodological reasons for not seeking informed consent. For example, individuals knowing that they are being observed may change the behaviour which is the object of the research. The critical point is to assess whether that risk is sufficiently high to outweigh the principle that participants have a right to freely given informed consent. Is consent required from everyone that may be observed or just those whom the research aims to observe? In situations where it is not possible or not desirable to seek informed consent other methods may be used to provide information to those who might be observed. Strategies include displaying posters about the research and providing information sheets to individuals entering the observed space. If consent is not being obtained from the individuals being observed the Research Ethics Committee would expect to see justification of this in the ethics application.

Particular ethical issues may be raised by observations of workplaces because of the power relationship between those being observed and their managers. Careful consideration should be given to whether the individuals being observed should be asked for their informed consent rather than just the gatekeepers or managers.

Much more difficult ethical issues are raised if the research is planning to record what is being observed (visual or audio). A clear rationale and details of the safeguards which will be put in place would be required in such circumstances.

What happens if a researcher observes something illegal or unsafe?

All researchers involved in the research should be clear about their legal and ethical responsibilities before carrying out research. Even though consent may not have been sought to carry out the observations, it is important that researchers abide by normal confidentiality protocols. Researchers should consider in advance what issues might arise and the appropriate action. A clear plan of what to do if observational research uncovers actions which are illegal, unsafe or harmful should be in place. This should include provision for the researcher to consult with a supervisor, project director, or another experienced researcher. In such circumstances, confidentiality is normally overridden.

Deceptive and other types of covert research

Generally, covert research is discouraged according to ethical guidelines, although it is recognised that covert designs are necessary in exceptional cases. An example of this might be an observational study in a public setting (and this could include online environments, such as internet chatrooms), if it would not be possible to reveal the nature of the research to everyone. Another example might be a study involving deception of participants, where the true purpose of the study is not revealed (or is only revealed after the study is completed). The ESRC

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Framework for Research Ethics¹ 2015:31 suggests that covert methods are justifiable in certain circumstances:

‘Covert research may be undertaken when it may provide unique forms of evidence that are crucial to the research objectives and methodology or where overt observation might alter the phenomenon being studied. The broad principle should be that covert research should not be undertaken lightly or routinely. It is only justified if important issues are being addressed and if matters of social significance which cannot be uncovered in other ways are likely to be discovered’

Where covert research is planned full ethical approval is required.

Is it possible to ensure that individuals can choose not to participate?

This question causes particular problems for observational research of group settings because it is often impossible to give individuals the option of whether or not to take part. In other circumstances, such as when there is a defined group, it may be possible to ensure that individuals are given the option not to take part in the research. However, this may be difficult to achieve in practice in some situations. For example, in a work place it may require managers to move employees to other roles whilst the research is taking place or it might mean that individuals cannot take part in activities because they are being observed. In such circumstances, the ethical principle of always giving individuals the option of opting out of the research needs to be balanced against the practicalities of doing so. Where practical and feasible, individuals should be given the option of withdrawing from the research.

How intrusive is the research?

Justifications for not following good ethical practices are likely to be more justifiable if the observation is not intrusive and poses little or no risk of harm to participants.

¹ <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics>