



AHC FREC: Notes for Applicants and Reviewers: Practice-led, action-led and participatory research
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Introduction

The purpose of the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee is to (FREC)¹ enable excellent and innovative research. FREC does this through promoting awareness and understanding of ethical issues in research and ensuring that research is conducted ethically. The Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures at the University of Leeds has a growing concentration of practice-led, action-led and participatory research which the FREC wants to actively support. The FREC has adapted the ethical review processes to give greater scope for researchers' own ethical practice to be articulated within the review process.

The FREC is keen to engage in an ongoing dialogue with researchers using these methods so that the committee can develop an ethical review processes which respond to the epistemic basis and collaborative ethos of these methods, at the same time as ensuring the legality of research and that all ethical issues have been considered and addressed.

Context

Over the past twenty years researchers using practice-led, action-led and participatory research have developed critiques of conventional ethical review processes. The main strands of this critique are that ethical review process have tended to assume certain logics, they have been developed based on a specific reading of power with an assumption towards the vulnerability rather than the agency of participants. This has shaped the way in which documents have framed.

In 2019 workshops and discussions were conducted with researchers – in collaboration with CePRA and the Participatory Research Group – to explore these issues from the perspective of current practice and what this might mean for ethical governance at the University of Leeds. Arising from the wider literature, the workshops and discussion at AHC FREC below are notes for Applicants and Reviewers.

Ethical practice: academically contextualised and situated in existing practices and debates

Ethical practice can address a specific range of issues (see: Identifying Ethical Issue Guidance / Identifying Ethical Issues: Checklist for Researchers) but there is more than one way of doing this. Not all ethical practice looks the same way, uses the same consent forms or deploys the same language. What makes for a strong ethical review application is the articulation of the ethical issues and a defined approach for dealing with those issues.

An example here might be how to deal with power dynamics in the research process. FREC welcomes research that seeks to share power and create new forms of agency in collaborative research processes. Such an application would need to give a focused account of why the approaches taken are appropriate and situate the research design choices in current debates in participatory research ethics.

In the application: The ethical review form has been revised to encourage researchers to explore and explain the ways in which their ethical approaches are situated in existing practices and ethical debates in their field. How has previous research dealt with the ethical dilemmas a project might generate?

Varied approaches to informed consent

¹ http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/AHC_FREC

You need to get consent for participants' involvement in the research and you need to be able to demonstrate this. There are many different ways of gaining and documenting consent, as many previous successful projects indicate. While there are key principles of informed consent that need to be addressed, how this is documented is open for researchers and their collaborators to determine.

In the application: AHC FREC already welcomes verbal consent process where this is the most appropriate approach.² Consent forms can be collaboratively designed with participants or participants could be asked to give feedback on draft versions. Reviewers will be looking for an active engagement with the principles of informed consent rather than requiring that a certain proforma is used.

The basis for practice-led, action-led and participatory research

The basis for practice-led, action-led and participatory research can vary but in many cases working with uncertainty and an interest in responding to what emerges are key principles. Taking these approaches might include working with people in different ways, using different techniques and approaching consent in different ways. FREC welcomes applications which have emergent and responsive research design. What makes for a successful ethical review application will be an articulation of your ongoing reflective practice and the critical rigour with which the relationship between research design and ethical approaches is established.

*In the application:*³ FREC appreciates that this means that very detailed and specific enumeration of numbers of participants and numbers of workshops may not be possible. One approach to uncertainty is to place the focus on a rigorous account of the principles by which the research will be conducted with an account of how these principles might be applied to different situations. The FREC needs to be confident that the researcher appreciates and is addressing the ethical issues associated with their research project.

For example:

- A researcher may not know in advance how many research 'events' might be useful in an emergent research design but they might be able to identify in advance the different types of interactions (such as interviews; workshops; drop in stalls).
- A researcher might not be able to commit to using one way of gaining informed consent in every situation, but they should be able to elaborate a menu of different consent approaches and say when each approach would be used and why.

Amendments: The current ethical review process has a procedure for amendments.⁴ Amendments do not need to be used when the researcher adds new events of the same type unless these result in a change to the ethical dimensions. Amendments should be only used when the principles of the approach to research ethics have changed or if an entirely new group (e.g. a group where capacity to consent might be more uncertain) are to be engaged.

² <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/involvingresearchparticipants>

³ <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/UoLEthicsapplication>

⁴ <http://ris.leeds.ac.uk/ethicsamendment>