

HREC Non-Medical: Guidelines for data collection via observational methods

"Studies based on observation in natural settings must respect the privacy and psychological wellbeing of the individuals studied. Unless those observed give their consent to being observed, observational research is only acceptable in public situations where those observed would expect to be observed by strangers. Additionally, particular account should be taken of local cultural values and of the possibility of intruding upon the privacy of individuals who, even while in a normally public space, may believe they are unobserved." (The British Psychological Society Code of Human Research Ethics, 2010, p25).

When collecting data via observational methods, especially within specific organisations like schools, there are several aspects to consider. Researchers need to describe the data collection steps very carefully and systematically in their proposal and ethics applications, such that the HREC can clearly understand what the researcher wants to do. **A separate document detailing an observational plan/schedule should be submitted.**

- Please indicate *who* is going to be observed. Please specify whether you are observing *specific* participants or whether you are observing just people in general (e.g. aggregated movements of people in a public place).
- Please indicate *where* the observations will take place. Please note that permissions may be needed to observe participants in some localities (e.g. within an office building or as part of a meeting).
- Please indicate exactly *what* is going to be observed: what specific interactions, activities or behaviours that you will note as part of the observation process. Please be aware that participants need to be broadly aware of why they are being observed in the first place.
- Specify *how* the observations will be recorded or noted (e.g. via audio, video, hand-written notes, photographs, etc.). Provide a strong justification for using photography or video recording. Explain exactly what/whom is to be recorded in this process. Please note that consent from participants is needed for all types of observational recordings.
- Provide an estimate of the *time* to be spent in the observation activity. Please note that this needs to be made very clear to participants.
- Explain how you plan to *store* the photographs or recordings, and whether or not anonymity and confidentiality can be maintained in this process (e.g. whether or not faces be blurred). Appropriate data storage for digital data is on a password protected computer or cloud platform. For written notes, appropriate data storage is in a locked cabinet or cupboard.
- Explain whether you intend to *share* the photographs or recordings, including whether photographs are going to be used within your research report, and how anonymity will be maintained. This is also relevant if the *locality* of observational data collection can be identified.

Please consider the nuances around consent/assent for observation based on:

- The age(s) of participants,
- The vulnerability of the participants,
- The topic/focus of the study,

- The sensitivity of the topic,
- The level of intrusiveness posed by the observations,
- The need for anonymity and confidentiality of the activities observed,
- The risk level of the study.

In the case of classroom or lecture observations, remember that learners/adult students and teachers/lecturers become research participants if a researcher is observing their activities, behaviours, teaching approach, discussions or interactions in the classroom. Researchers will need to consider the need for teacher/lecturer/adult student consent, and parental consent and learner assent in the case of minors.

If observations are to be recorded via audio or video recording or photography, the researcher should seek formal consent from participants (and parental consent and learner assent in the case of minors). Video recording should only be used if deemed essential to the research project, especially if minors are involved. Please explain exactly what is to be recorded, e.g. teacher interactions with learners, backs of heads vs recognisable faces, learners completing work in their school books, etc. It is important to implement strategies to exclude learners/students who choose not to participate from the data collection (e.g. by positioning them away from the recording). If photographs are to be taken, it is usually not necessary to photograph participant faces at all.

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