

University of Toronto
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board (SSH REB)

Guidelines for Ethical Conduct in Participant Observation

This document is designed to serve two purposes. First it serves to help researchers think about some of the ethical issues that might arise while doing studies that involve Participant Observation. Second the guidelines should aid applicants in preparing protocols in a way that will provide the REB with the information they need to make an informed judgement on the ethical issues involved in *this component* of the research programme. These guidelines are the result of an initial consultative process chaired by Professor Gavin Smith within the Department of Anthropology, and were jointly drafted with Professor Katharine Rankin (Geography) and Professor Jacques Bertrand (Political Science); they were approved with minor revisions at a special meeting of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board, May 11, 2005.

Participant Observation Described

Participant Observation is usually just one part of a cluster of other non-experimental, inductive, field-based research strategies. These guidelines refer only to the Participant Observation component.

In Participant Observation the researcher is, to a greater or lesser extent, immersed in the day-to-day activities of the people being studied. The objective is usually to record conduct under the widest range of possible settings. In this way, participant observation differs from ‘naturalistic observation’, as discussed in the Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) because the latter does not involve interaction between researcher and researched.

Insofar as information is often the result of dialogical interaction between the researcher and the informants, participant observation covers a wide range of ethical issues that are complex and often unpredictable. Because most participant observation involves long term presence among the people being studied, the informed consent process should be dynamic and continuous. Starting with the project design it should continue throughout the participant observation period by way of dialogue with those studied.

Participant Observation was historically associated with a form of research in which the researchers resides for extended periods of time in a small community. These guidelines, however, refer also to Participant Observation in a wide variety of settings, and over longer and shorter periods of time; for example, participant observation can transpire in institutions, class rooms and markets, or it may involve travelling with migrants, or interacting with specific categories of people.

Overall Principles

The range of issues:

Among the issues that throw up special challenges for Participant Observation, especially as it is practised in social/cultural anthropology and cognate disciplines, are:

- The often long term nature of the interface between researcher and the subjects of study;
- The wide range of relationships involved, such as status differences between the two parties, power differences and educational differences, as well as degrees of formality;
- The variety of settings, from close interpersonal interactions to observation of public meetings and actual participation in social events.
- In many cases, the research will be taking place in settings that are unfamiliar to the researcher, making her/his presentation of self and interaction with others especially sensitive. While ethical issues are often raised in the context of cultural differences the same kinds of issues may arise when research transpires in familiar settings. Power differentials rooted in gender, class, health and so on also require similar sensitivity.
- The ethical codes of the groups under study may well be different from those of the researcher's home country/home institution. They may also be different from the ethical principles followed by the host government, non-governmental organizations in the area, or funding agencies for the research.
- The potentially changing nature of the researcher's roles and relationships over time.

In addressing these issues, researchers should:

- be as aware as possible that the researcher practising Participant Observation does not have just one role – that of the researcher – but performs a variety of statuses and roles;
- be especially sensitive to differences of age, gender, class, health, and culture that may raise ethical issues during the course of Participant Observation;
- be aware of potential clashes in ethical principles, and give primary ethical obligations to the people being studied or being effected by the study. In some instances, researchers may have to make exception to this principle.
- be mindful of evolving roles and relationships over time, and any new ethical issues that may arise as a result.

Stages in the research programme

Researchers are encouraged to think through the changing ethical challenges through the various stages of the research programme, from issues prior to fieldwork, entering the field-site, the changing nature of interactions as the fieldwork proceeds, the responsibilities that arise as one leaves the field and, finally, ethical issues arising from writing up Participant Observation based research. Precisely because it is difficult to anticipate every ethical issue, researchers engaged in long term Participant Observation need to interrogate themselves continuously about the ethical issues arising as the research setting undergoes change.

Technical Recording

While there are a vast range of informal interactions, encounters, observations and 'participations' involved in this form of research, with the various ethical issues that thereby arise, it is to be noted that more 'technical' practices produce their own particular ethical concerns. These include mapping, filming, video-taping, photographing and tape-recording.

Confidentiality

As with ethics more generally so too with confidentiality, the most important issue is not so much to do with one or another setting, but with taking extreme care *overall* and as one crosses from one setting to another. The confidentiality of the Participant Observer's knowledge must be made *explicit* to each informant as well as to the larger group of people that provide the setting of the research. But in many cultural settings it will be important that the Participant Observer's discretion is also conveyed implicitly and over time. Researchers need to be aware too that confidentiality refers to information gathered in any of the components of their research programme, not just that gathered through Participant Observation. (This can include land-holding records, court cases, information gathered from archives, interviews, and so on.)

The distinction between informal and more technical interfaces applies here too. Specific information gathered about health, intimate relations and beliefs, or even economic data, can be especially sensitive and may require additional reassurances to informants and those closely connected to them.

Informed consent

Even in the context of Participant Observation, informed consent remains one of the most important ethical principles. There are numerous issues that arise in the context of seeking informed consent during Participant Observation. Is it feasible to receive formal informed consent from every participant in a group with which one interacts? At what point is informed consent required, given the numerous roles and statuses the researcher adopts? Can one receive "collective" consent by approaching group leaders or spokespersons? There are no easy answers to these questions. They vary by setting and by the nature of the research. However, the researcher should seek the highest standards in applying the principle of informed consent when using Participant Observation. In so doing, the researcher should:

- ensure that participants are aware of the researcher's identity and purpose among the group;
- Disclose and disseminate as broadly as possible through general announcements or other more informal means the researcher's purpose, research topic, and data gathering method. Participants should be aware that any of their interactions with the researcher may constitute some form of data gathering.
- Seek permission from group leaders or spokespersons, where appropriate, but especially if they can help to broadcast to a community the researcher's identity, purpose, method. However, researchers should also be careful to

avoid situations where such public endorsements/announcements to the community can create pressure to participate. Participants should remain free to avoid all interaction with the researcher.

- As much as possible, the researcher should obtain informed consent from each individual participant with whom the researcher will be interacting. It is especially important to remain aware that some participants might not be fully informed despite general announcements in public. As the researcher gains awareness of the level of information individual participants have about the researcher's identity, purpose and method, he/she should make every possible effort to disclose such information individually.

Preparing the Protocol

In preparing protocols, researchers should reflect on the general principles of the Tri-Council Statement and how they can best be implemented in the context of Participant Observation. The task is to reassure a fellow scholar in the social sciences and humanities—but possibly one not familiar with this form of research—that one has thought out and resolved as many ethical issues as can reasonably be anticipated. The researcher should clearly explain the reasons for choosing a particular kind of process for obtaining informed consent and for respecting confidentiality. Of course, in addition to the Tri-Council Statement, the researcher can take into account these guidelines on Participant Observation and the particularities of the context when communicating research methods and means of ensuring ethical standards. Protocols should provide ample and clear information on these processes and demonstrate that the researcher has weighed potential harms against the benefits of the research.

1. **Methodology:** Researchers should fully explain the setting (s) for Participant Observation, what potential interactions are involved, how data will be gathered, the kinds of issues that might be discussed more formally, and detail as much as possible the anticipated process. It is fine to acknowledge the limitations of predicting ahead of time what will happen during the course of the research, but details that can be anticipated should be stated.
2. **Participants:** Describe who the people are, and reflect on potential ethical issues that may arise in the context of the research. It is acceptable to disregard issues of sample size and 'inclusion/exclusion criteria' unless these are relevant to your methods. The researcher should also explain how s/he plans to enter the field and make people more familiar with his/her presence and the nature of the research project.
3. **Potential harms:** the researcher should expand as much as possible on the extent and variety of potential harm to participants.
4. **Privacy and confidentiality:** The researcher should provide information about how he/she will safeguard data once recorded and treat sensitive information. If one intends to quote or name anyone in publications/work, explicit consent must be sought from participants, or they should be made explicitly aware, on an individual basis, that they might be quoted.

5. Informed consent: While the Tri-Council Policy Statement upholds the principle of written consent as superior to verbal consent, there are many settings in which verbal consent is more appropriate. In many cases involving Participant Observation researchers would not find it feasible or desirable to seek written informed consent by all participants. In such cases, verbal consent will be required. In any case, the researcher should elaborate on the appropriateness of a particular informed consent process for the setting/group studied by Participant Observation, and should include means of informing the community/group/individuals of the researcher's identity, purpose, topic of research and method; appropriateness of seeking consent from group leaders or spokespersons; informal/formal means of obtaining informed consent, relative to what is appropriate in the given setting. It is important to clearly explain ethical dilemmas that might arise, or limitations to ideal procedures in given contexts.