University of Manitoba | Human Research Ethics

Human Research Ethics - Fort Garry
66 Chancellors Circle
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2
humanethics@umanitoba.ca

Guidelines for Observational Research

Overview

Typically, research involving the observation of human participants requires REB review and approval as well as consent from participants. However, there are cases when REB review is not required. Specifically, REB review is not required for research involving the observation of people in **public places** where:

a. it does not involve any intervention staged by the researcher, or direct interaction with the individuals or groups;
b. individuals or groups targeted for observation have no reasonable expectation of privacy; **and**
c. any dissemination of research results does not allow identification of specific individuals.

Examples of public spaces include parks, grocery stores, city squares, and libraries. These are spaces where people have no reasonable expectation of privacy. Please note that all three of the above conditions must be met in order to be exempt from REB review.

Some places may appear to be public but are not. For example, individuals **do have an expectation of privacy** when they are in religious centers, hospitals, clinics, schools, and their workplaces. These spaces typically require permission to use the space and carry out research as described in the Other Approvals section below.

Observation is not limited to physical spaces but also applies to online spaces. For example, spaces such as chat rooms may appear public, however the terms of use or the requirement to be invited into the chat room may mean that these spaces are considered to be private.

If you are not sure if a space would be considered public, email humanethics@umanitoba.ca.

Types of Observation

The TCPS 2 outlines two types of observational studies.

- Non-Participant Observational Research: The study of human acts or behaviours in a natural environment in which people involved in their normal activities are observed with or without their knowledge by researchers who do not intervene in any way in the activity. Also known as "naturalistic observational research."
- Participant Observational Research: The study of human acts or behaviours in a natural environment in which people involved in their normal activities are observed with or without their knowledge by researchers who participate in some way in the activity.

Ethical Considerations in Observational Research

Article 10.3 of the TCPS 2 (2022) addresses the ethical considerations for observational research involving human acts or behaviours in natural environments or virtual settings where individuals have a reasonable or limited expectation of privacy.

Recruitment

Recruitment of participants for observation (where applicable) should follow the Participant Recruitment Guidelines. Researchers must make participants aware of their identity. They should also make their purpose clear including the research objectives and method(s) of data collection. Group leaders may be enlisted to help share this information. However, care must be taken to ensure that any publicly shared information about the research avoids pressuring people to participate.

Consent

The default requirement is that individuals provide consent prior to their involvement in the research. This must be documented, regardless of the method of consent (e.g. written, verbal). In certain circumstances, it may not be feasible to obtain written consent from all participants and researchers may decide to obtain verbal consent instead. The onus is on the researcher to justify the method of consenting participants in the context of the proposed research.

In some cases, such as covert research, informed consent may not be required if no personal information is collected, such as observing how participants react to someone cutting in line at the grocery store checkout. The decision as to whether consent is required is up to the REB.

Where identifiable information will be collected during covert observation, clear justification on not obtaining consent must be provided to the REB. The steps that will be taken to ensure that the privacy of participants is protected must also be explained. This is especially critical where a researcher is observing and studying criminal behaviours, violent groups, or groups with restricted membership. Where the researcher suggests that they are justified in not seeking consent, they must also explain if there will be a debriefing process, how that will occur, and how participants can withdraw their data where it is possible and appropriate.

Data Collection

Describe all forms of data collection in the ethics submission. This includes the range of interactions that the researcher may have with participants.

Researchers use various methods to record observations, ensuring they capture accurate and comprehensive data. Here are some common techniques:

1. Field Notes: Researchers take notes during and/or immediately after the observation. These notes may include descriptions of behaviour, events, interactions, spaces, etc.
2. Audio and Video Recordings: Using audio or video devices allows researchers to capture interactions and behaviours in real-time to be reviewed later for analysis.
3. Checklists and Rating Scales: Predefined checklists and rating scales help researchers systematically record the presence or frequency of specific behaviours or events as they observe participants.
4. Time Sampling: This method involves recording observations at specific intervals, such as every five minutes, to capture data over a period.
5. Event Sampling: Researchers record every occurrence of a particular behaviour or event, regardless of when it happens.

Observation Guide

In addition to completing the usual sections of the ethics protocol (participants, recruitment, consent, etc.), researchers conducting observations must also attach their Observation Guide. The REB recognizes that Observation Guides may be emergent and not take the form of a pre-determined protocol. However, Observation Guides must address the following points:

1. Observation Plans
    - Explain the setting where the observations will take place
    - Describe the potential interactions that may be involved (e.g. in a classroom, this may be teacher-student; peers; parents)
    - Identify the data that will be gathered about participants as well as the kinds of data you will collect about the setting (e.g. descriptive layout of the space, photograph of the space)
    - Outline the details of the anticipated process (acknowledging the limitations of predicting this ahead of time)
    - Outline the anticipated length of time of the observation(s)
2. Participants
    - Describe the people to be observed and how you will record information about them (e.g., creating pseudonyms).
    - Indicate how you will enter the field and introduce yourself and the research project.
    - Describe how you will confirm who has consented/not consented before recording any observations. Include how you will manage those who have not consented to be observed. For example, in a classroom, children who consented could be given different stickers than those who did not consent. In smaller groups, name tags may be sufficient.
    - Reflect on ethical issues that may arise. For example, if audio- or video-recording is used during data collection, people who have opted out must not be recorded. It is usually possible for them to be positioned or seated away from where the recording is taking place to avoid accidental capture. At the same time, it is important to ensure that they have their normal experience. If a non-participant is inadvertently caught on the video or audio recording, the researcher must be able to delete it, blur the image, or beep out that person's voice.
3. Observers
    - Identify who will be collecting the data.
    - Describe the training any observers will complete to ensure they understand the research question, objectives and can record the observed behaviours or events.
4. Harms
    - Explain any potential harms to participants.
5. Analysis
    - Describe how the data will be analyzed.
    - Describe how participants will be mentioned in publications and dissemination. If you intend to include quotations in your dissemination, you must have obtained consent from the participant.

Confidentiality and Risks

If a researcher is collecting data in a public space without consent, they may inadvertently use descriptors in their observation that could indirectly identify someone. This possibility must be addressed in the ethics submission by explaining how the privacy of that individual or those individuals will be protected in accordance with the law. Identification of individuals, groups or communities during dissemination may breach privacy expectations.

The risks associated with participating, where individuals may be identified in the dissemination of results, should also be clearly set out and addressed, both in the ethics submission and in the consent form (where applicable). Risks of identification may be social, behavioural, psychological, or economic.

Where consent is obtained and participants are given the option to waive anonymity, but identifying one individual may compromise the confidentiality of other individuals, then the identify of all participants should be kept confidential (Article 5.1, Application).

Other Approvals

If observations will take place in spaces that are private, or require permission to gain access, approval must be sought to conduct observations in that space. Evidence of such approvals or scripts to seek such approvals (email script, phone script, etc.) must be submitted as part of the ethics protocol.