

Ethnography

Key principles:

- Encourage ethnographic research practices (in all their diverse forms) with ethical rigour, where appropriate
- Ensure adherence to ethical standards for research conduct
- Ethnographic research shares ethical principles that underline good practice in qualitative research, including informed consent, right to withdraw without penalty, preservation of anonymity and confidentiality, and specific sensitivities and responsibilities when working with children or vulnerable adults
- Where ethnography involves observation, consent of those observed is required unless occurring in public space; in such instances, informed consent should be sought where possible and where appropriate; in some cases this could involve gaining informed consent *post hoc*. Researchers should refer to the **Social Research Association (SRA)** statement on “Respecting rights in observation studies” (<http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>)
- Researchers should also acknowledge the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and the Commonwealth (ASA) statement on Participant Observation involves certain key ethical principles:
 - Participants should be made aware of the presence and purpose of the researcher whenever reasonably practicable. Researchers should inform participants of their research in the most appropriate way depending on the context of the research.
 - Fieldnotes (and other forms of personal data) are predominantly private barring legal exceptions. This is the most important way in which confidentiality and the anonymity of subjects is ensured. [Ethnographers] have a duty to protect all original records of their research from unauthorised access. They also have a duty to ensure that nothing that they publish or otherwise make public, through textual or audio-visual media, would permit identification of individuals that would put their welfare or security at risk.
- Ethnographers should seek the advice and clarification of the LREC in order to address questions of potential harm, vulnerability, and consent; some ethical issues may require revisiting, upon reflection (e.g., consent may need to be on-going); the LREC should be updated regarding questions or changes as research contexts develop
- Some ethnographic practices may bring increased risk to the researcher (i.e., field work); such risks need to be addressed accordingly in the documentation

Social Research Association (SRA) ethics

<http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/ethics03.pdf>

The SRA provides useful guidance for respecting rights in observation studies:

In observation studies, where behaviour patterns are observed without the subject’s knowledge, social researchers must take care not to infringe what may be referred to as the “private space” of

an individual or group. This will vary from culture to culture. Where practicable, social researchers should attempt to obtain consent post hoc. In any event, they should interpret behaviour patterns that appear deliberately to make observation difficult as a tacit refusal of permission to be observed.

The principles above urge extreme caution in these cases and advise social researchers to respect the imputed wishes of the subjects. Thus, in observation studies or in studies involving proxies, the principle to be followed is that mere indications of reluctance on the part of an uninformed or unconsenting subject should be taken as a refusal to participate. Any other course of action would be likely to demonstrate a lack of respect for the subject's interests and to undermine the relationship between, say, proxy and subject on the one hand, and between researcher and subject on the other.

Other useful codes of practice:

- **SRA Code of safety for social researchers:** http://the-sra.org.uk/sra_resources/safety-code/
- **Royal Anthropology Institute (RAI)** also have a good resource on their website re ethical guidelines for various approaches to anthropological fieldwork. See the following link: <http://www.therai.org.uk/about-the-rai/governance/ethical-policy>
- **Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth (ASA)** ethical guidance on ethnography: <http://www.theasa.org/ethics.shtml>
- **British Sociological Association** <http://www.britisoc.co.uk/about/equality/statement-of-ethical-practice.aspx>
See for example paragraphs 23, 25,27, 28, 31-33
- The **BERA** guidelines provide information on ethical standards in educational research but make no reference directly to ethnographic practice or participant observation: <http://content.yudu.com/Library/A1t9gr/BERAEthicalGuideline/resources/index.htm?referrerUrl=http%25253A%25252F%25252Fwww.yudu.com%25252Fitem%25252Fdetails%25252F375952%25252FBERA-Ethical-Guidelines-2011>
- Outcome of the **European Commission's Respect** project is at: http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/respect_code.pdf