

SREC Guidance for Social Researchers Engaging in Ethnography / Autoethnography (AE) or Utilising Ethnographic Methods

June 2020

Introduction

Researchers using ethnographic methods or conducting an ethnography or an autoethnography may experience challenges reconciling their research projects with the university's ethics review requirements. This guidance is provided to supplement general SREC requirements and guidance pertaining to research ethics and should be read in conjunction with other the other information provided on the SREC web page. Researchers, whether they are conducting ethnography or not, are expected to comply with the usual ethical requirements and the laws relevant to the country context where the research is being conducted. If the ethnographic research is being conducted in a context where a lower standard of ethics applies, UCC researchers are still expected to adhere to the ethical standards set out in the UCC Code of Research Conduct (See UCC, 2019).

Considerations for Researchers Doing Ethnographies / Using Ethnographic Methods

Ethnographic and autoethnographic research projects require ethics engagement which is explicit, and ongoing. When doing ethnographic research, researchers should still be clear that their main obligation is to the research participants and in the context of any conflicting obligations etc. the interests and rights of those studied should come first. Ethnographic research conducted with vulnerable populations, minorities, subcultures or deviant groups, merits careful ethical consideration, planning and researcher commitment. This should be in evidence in an application submitted for ethical review. For example, researchers could engage members of the population they are researching and/ or their advocates in the planning of the research to ensure that the research is conducted with the degree of understanding, insight and sensitivity appropriate to the persons being researched. In their applications researchers should show that they are aware of their duty of care to the researched to ensure as much as possible that what they make public or publish through any

medium (photographs, video, articles etc.) does not identify individuals or enable their identification or put their security or welfare at risk. This also applies to autoethnographers, who need to consider their responsibilities to others (e.g. anonymity, confidentiality, privacy), who may feature in the 'research stories' they are telling about their lives (Ellis, 2007, p. 4). Ethnographic research often involves the use of diverse modes of data collection in both structured / unstructured and formal /informal ways. In this context every effort should be made to disclose to the Ethics Review Committee in as much detail as possible and in advance of the research, the likely scenarios (e.g. observations, formal and informal conversations, recordings etc.) in which it is anticipated by the researcher that data will be gathered.

Communicating Researcher Purpose

When conducting an ethnography, researchers should identify themselves as researchers and be introduced by gatekeepers / key informants / facilitators of the research, as researchers. For example, posters in fluid research settings, can be used to supplement efforts made to inform persons as to who the researcher is and what kind of research they are doing. When reviewing autoethnographic research, reviewers need to be convinced that autoethnographers are doing their utmost to exercise their responsibilities to themselves (as the subjects of their research), to others (e.g. relational others), to their audience and to society. For instance, given the nature of autoethnographic research, autoethnographers should show in their applications how they are utilising data quality control measures and producing data of scientific value.

Consent Issues

Prior informed consent may not be possible or desirable in some situations (e.g. very fluid public meeting, observing at football matches, observing at parades or protests etc.). However, data gathered in 'naturalistic' settings or recordings etc. of 'public' events should not be used in a way, which could personally identify individuals or cause harm to them.

In the case of the withholding of information about the research to accrue a methodological advantage, informed consent should be obtained at the earliest opportunity and prior to data analysis and reporting.

Covert research methods violate the principle of informed research and the privacy of the researched. Covert research should only be engaged in, where it is not possible to use other methods to obtain the data. The Social Research Ethics Committee would expect that covert research should be exceptionally rare. For the purpose of ethics review, it would require a very strong justification; evidence of researcher competence / supervisor mentoring and support when applicants are students; that the covert nature of the research is considered and that important safeguards are employed to protect the rights and interests of the researched and the researcher (e.g. to protect anonymity, researcher self-protection etc.).

In the context of ethnography, an understanding of consent as a process that involves negotiation and renegotiation over time, may be of particular benefit to some research projects. Repeat reminding / checking is one way of ensuring that persons are mindful of the purpose of the researcher and that their consent is obtained continuously. If informed consent is not obtained from everyone (e.g. fluid research settings) prior to the research being conducted, every effort has to be made to ensure it is obtained post-hoc.

Public and Private in the Context of the Research Being Conducted

Avoid undue intrusion and care should be taken not to infringe uninvited upon the private space of an individual or a group. There is not always clear understandings between what is considered public and private and the boundaries between the two are constantly shifting, therefore, researchers should ensure that they have made every effort to inform themselves of understandings of public and private held by those that they are researching. Autoethnographies often involve making publicly accessible what is usually kept private by social convention and the implications of doing this for self and others need careful consideration.

Protecting Anonymity

Maintaining anonymity can be a challenge in the context of ethnographic research. Commitments made to research participants need to be honoured and they need to be feasible in the context of the kind of research being undertaken. Any challenges or limitations to protecting persons' identities or privacy should be considered and brought to the attention of those being researched. It is possible that a certain configuration of attributes can disclose persons' or groups' identities etc. and it is possible to disguise these if the data is not so distorted as to compromise scholarly accuracy and integrity. Extended embargo periods can assist researchers to honour their commitments to the researched, while securing the research material for future use. In the context of where there will be public showings or publication of photographs / film etc. of large public events etc., every effort should be made not to compromise persons' identities or their security. Self-identification in the context of autoethnographic research may mean that reviewers seek additional assurances to know that this is an aspect that has been the greatest of care and consideration in an application.

References / Resources

Association of Social Anthropologists Ethical Guidelines (2011) Available at: <https://www.theasa.org/downloads/ASA%20ethics%20guidelines%202011.pdf>

Ellis, C. (2007) 'Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives, Relational Ethics in Research with Intimate Others' *Qualitative Inquiry*. 13: 3-29.

Lapadat, J.C. (2017) 'Ethics in Autoethnography and Collaborative Autoethnography' *Qualitative Inquiry*. 23(8): 589-603.

UCC (2019) *Code of Research Conduct*, Version 2.3. See:

<https://crc.ucc.ie/en/media/research/researchatucc/ethicswebpage/UCCCodeofResearchConductV2.3FINAL281119.pdf>