

Guidance note: Researching within your own institution

Undertaking research within your own institution presents ethical conundrums which are not present when researching as an “outsider”, and these issues are not always made explicit in ethics approval forms, especially because many of these questions relate to your personal interactions with colleagues rather than the more typical ethical dilemmas faced by a removed researcher, and continue to have relevance once the research has been completed.

As such, this guidance note has been produced to highlight the specific issues which relate to undertaking research within your own organisation as a tool to help you identify the areas you need to additionally consider in your ethics approval forms.

Commonly encountered issues when researching your own organisation include:

- 1) You may well have on-going professional and/or personal relationships with the people you are researching.
 - This is likely to influence how you design your research in the first place, but will also have ramifications for your future involvement with the organisation, ramifications which may last for the duration of your involvement (which may be several years) and may re-emerge in the future in a way you couldn't predict.
 - In some cases (teachers and pupils, doctors and patients) there is a legally recognised duty of care; in these cases it is essential that the research does not affect the professional care required by the relationship.
 - You cannot unhear the information you are told as part of the research - people might tell you things they wouldn't tell an outsider and/or assume that you agree with their point of view. This can lead to questions about ownership of the data which may need to be re-explored prior to dissemination (for example, would an individual withdraw consent if a specific piece of information were used), and your sense of responsibility to treat your participants (potentially also friends and close colleagues) fairly can be stressful with potential ramifications for your sense of wellbeing.
 - You may gain access to information you wouldn't (and possibly shouldn't) have access to under your professional role which can lead to conflict with colleagues or make you feel you need to lie to obscure either the knowledge or the source of it
 - You also need to be mindful that whatever the institutional hierarchy is, it still exists whilst you are a researcher – for example, your line manager will not tell you something they do not want to tell you as a direct report, even if it is directly relevant to your research. This may impact upon the quality of the data you can acquire, and applies in both directions (i.e. some people in the organisation have more power than you, but there may be others who you are more powerful than, and this also has consequences for your research).

Your ethics form should be used to explain how you will navigate these issues and ensure that none of your participants feel unduly pressurised into taking part.

- 2) Your deeper knowledge of the organisation you are going to be researching may affect your research
 - Will your research suffer from (possibly tacit) interview bias? (introduced by either the interviewer or the interviewee)? – interview bias being where preformed expectations change the questions, responses or analysis
 - What do you do if you know that the subject of your interview has lied to you? Is the answer different if the subject has made a mistake? What if they are trying to save face?
 - How will you reconcile data which is not in alignment with your own assumptions/knowledge about the organisation?
 - How much should your inside knowledge influence the research?
 - Will you be able to critically reflect on what for you is normal day to day?

3) How to reconcile the practitioner and researcher roles

- As a practitioner, you are actively involved in the organisation, as a researcher you need to dispassionately observe
- What do you do if, as part of the research, you discover something which is detrimental to the organisation? This may have been told to you in confidence
- Always make these dual responsibilities clear to your participants
- Recognise the potential for conflict of interest and seek advice as soon as possible if this occurs

4) How will you maintain the anonymity of participants in the organisation? And the organisation itself?

- Because your research has engaged with a small number of people from a pre-determined grouping, it will always be more difficult to maintain anonymity for both the participants and the organisation
- If you publish under your own name, you almost automatically make the organisation identifiable
- An individual may be identifiable through their job title
- Should you assume that it is not possible to maintain anonymity for the organisation, if so what extra steps might you need to take to guarantee anonymity for participants?
- If you circulate a draft to participants for approval and one of the participants is inadvertently identifiable then everyone involved in the research then knows even if the identifying detail is removed from subsequent drafts
- You also need to take care to ensure that your supervisor/mentor cannot identify participants from the data you share with them, especially if undertaking research within the College
- Will the need to maintain anonymity adversely affect how you interact with your colleagues in the future?
- How should this be reflected in your consent forms?
- Do you need to consider a second round of ethical review if/when you decide to publish the findings to ensure all necessary steps have been taken to ensure your participants are protected?
- Questions of anonymity are different within the organisation and outside the organisation and both need to be fully considered

5) what will you do if the organisation asks for access to the data?

- Make sure you establish what the organisation can have access to before any data collection has taken place
- Agree how questions of anonymity will be handled
- Write a data management plan to articulate how the data will be stored and shared to help the ethics committee to advise you

This guidance note is intended to highlight potential ethical issues which can be encountered when researching your own organisation; however, there can be substantial benefits to researching your own organisation. These include:

- Your familiarity with the organisation means you are well placed to produce an account which is meaningful to your participants
- You are empowered to develop a fuller and more nuanced account of your findings which may increase the likelihood of your findings being used

Floyd A., and Arthur L., (2012), Researching from within: internal and external ethical engagement, Intl. J Research & Methods in Education, 35 (2) 171-180

The British Educational Research Association also has a significant number of resources about researching your own institution which are Higher Education specific.