

## 2

### ACCESS, ETHICS AND PROJECT PLANNING

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#### 2.1 Introduction

It has long been recognised that qualitative research can pose significant challenges to gaining access, securing consent and planning projects. Video can exacerbate these difficulties and, unless carefully managed, can undermine the possibility of undertaking the research. In this chapter, we address the problems and issues that arise when seeking to gain access to undertake video-based research and consider how these difficulties can be addressed and in many cases avoided. We also discuss research ethics and, in particular, the ways in which formal ethical approval can be secured in order to undertake video-based research. In discussing access we draw on our own experience in undertaking three particular projects: a study of team work, collaboration and new technology in London Underground; the use of documents by children in classrooms; and the conduct of visitors in museums and galleries. Each of these projects and the settings in which they were undertaken pose distinct challenges to data collection and yet they demonstrate that with the

right approach it is possible to gain permission to undertake video-based research even in seemingly 'sensitive' environments. We conclude by considering how issues of access and ethics fit within the planning of video-based research projects more generally.

## **2.2 Gaining access and agreement to record**

One reason that is often raised for not using video in qualitative research is that it will be impossible to gain permission from participants, or more generally, an organisation to make recordings. Surprisingly perhaps, gaining access to undertake video recording rarely proves a major difficulty, as long as you are sensitive to the demands of the setting and address the concerns of the participants themselves. In recent years, video-based studies have been undertaken in such diverse settings and activities as medical consultations, management consultancy, counselling interviews, banking and financial management, surgical operations, air traffic control, hair-dressing, surveillance, nursing, television and radio production, home life, shops and business meetings. Each of these settings pose distinct challenges for data collection and demand different techniques for securing consent. However, there are a number of common problems and issues that arise.

For example, many research settings, including schools, hospitals, businesses and the like, are 'closed access groups' (Hornsby-Smith, 1993) in that there are barriers to physically entering the setting as well as to undertaking the research. This means that different kinds of access have to be negotiated. In such cases it is necessary to establish trust and a working arrangement with participants themselves in addition to their managers and sometimes to other key stakeholders in the setting. To consider these different kinds of access it is useful to draw on the distinction between 'getting in' to a setting and 'getting on' with the participants (Cassell, 1998). This means that the people with whom you negotiate physical access to the setting are unlikely to be the people that you film. Both need to agree to the research for it to progress.

### ***'Getting in': Gaining physical access to the setting***

Organisations may turn down requests for access for a range of reasons. For instance, they may not be keen to engage in additional voluntary tasks (meetings, introductions, reading reports, etc.) or they may worry about the potential sensitivity of the topic or the confidentiality of the research. It is critical therefore to meet with participants and those responsible for the setting, and sometimes give short presentations about the proposed research and the background to the project. These preliminary meetings with members of the organisation allow you to understand some of their more general concerns and become sensitive to the different views and perspectives they hold.

In these meetings it is critical to provide a clear account of the project and why you wish to undertake the research. It is worthwhile also exploring how your own interests might resonate with those of the organisation. Organisations will

often be more willing to grant access if they can see how they might benefit from the project. Indeed one of the important contributions that a researcher can make to an organisation is to provide a brief report of their observations and findings that is tailored to the key concerns of the organisations involved. It is also important to establish your credibility by demonstrating your experience or knowledge of undertaking research and, if possible, research of similar organisations where video has been used. This can be done by discussing previous projects you have undertaken or by referring to studies undertaken by others in the field. It is important to assure the relevant 'gatekeepers' that the aim of the research is not to develop a critical analysis of the participants or the organisation, but rather to analyse their skills and practices; and more generally to understand the world from the perspective of the participants themselves. Finally they will need to be given a clear account of how the data will be analysed and disseminated and the extent to which they will be able to retain some control over access to data as well as, in some cases, to the findings of research themselves.

#### **'Getting on': Establishing trust and participation in the setting**

It can be a mistake to believe that once you have gained physical access to a setting then video recording can be undertaken without regard to the cooperation of the actual participants and the circumstances at hand. However, access is ordinarily an ongoing concern. An illustration of this comes in the film *Kitchen Stories* (2003, Director: Bent Hamer), which depicts a charming fictional account of observational research in the home. It centres on one researcher who gains physical access to a single man's house to study his use of the kitchen. Soon after the study commences the man becomes uncomfortable with the presence of the researcher and ends up cooking in his bedroom, rendering the study worthless. This is an extreme example, but without proper communication with participants they may in various ways resist involvement. They may avoid the view of the camera, they may have conversations away from the microphone, or in other ways avoid being filmed. To ensure the data is of good quality (as opposed to simply 'data'), the participants must be willing to participate fully.

So even in cases where you might have secured more formal permission from senior management in an organisation, access may well remain a continuing concern. In order to develop the trust necessary for collecting video it is usual to initially visit the proposed research setting on several occasions. Before recording takes place, a period of fieldwork is useful to discuss the project with core participants, to clarify any distinctive challenges relevant to the setting, to identify any key concerns and so forth. On these occasions, the fieldwork will give you a much clearer idea of the practicalities of recording in the setting and will also provide an opportunity to learn more about the specific concerns or reservations of the participants. In this way, they will get to know you before they encounter your camera.

It may be tempting to only seek permission from key members of an organisation for undertaking your research, but it is important to make sure that the range of people who may be affected by your research are willing to cooperate

if you want to avoid problems and difficulties. In our experience we have found little concern from participants in our undertaking video recording *as long as they have been properly informed*. In part this may be due to the methodological orientation we adopt; one that is primarily concerned with the analysis of the participants' practices, the knowledge, reasoning and procedures on which they rely to accomplish their activities. Concerns may arise when a researcher adopts a stance that is more at odds with the participants and tries, for example, to uncover mistakes, errors and failings. Clarification of your interests and approach can serve to allay these concerns.

Once you have become more familiar with the setting, and the participants have a clearer idea of the aims and scope of the research, then it will be easier to introduce a camera for recording. In almost all the projects that we have undertaken, we discuss with the participants themselves as well as key stakeholders: (i) the advantages of recording for the analysis of the activities and taking the participants' conduct seriously; (ii) the importance of recording remaining as unobtrusive as practically possible; (iii) that data will only be used for research (and in some cases teaching); (iv) that copies will not be available for those outside the research team; and (v) that in no circumstances will the data be broadcast, appear on the web or be used for commercial gain. We also emphasise that at any point before, during or following data collection, the participants can refuse to be recorded or have materials destroyed. We often propose that, in the first instance, we will collect one or two hours of data and participants can then judge for themselves whether they are happy to cooperate further. In other words, even in cases where permission is granted to undertake recording, we provide the participants with successive opportunities to discuss their reservations or concerns. This helps to develop trust and develop a working relationship with the participants.

### **Informed consent**

The principle of informed consent is paramount for ethical approval bodies and so it is increasingly important to establish formal consent for undertaking video recording. For qualitative research this typically requires written consent from all participants (see Box 2.1). This is normally obtained by providing participants with an information sheet about the research and then, after being given suitable time to read and discuss it, they are asked to sign a form confirming their permission and participation. Participants should not be placed under pressure to provide their consent and they should have the time and opportunity to raise questions and issues that may come to mind. Furthermore the consent form highlights their right to withdraw from the research at any stage.

In many circumstances, gaining written permission to undertake video recording is unproblematic. If the setting is clearly bounded and does not involve large numbers of individuals or rapidly changing personnel, then obtaining written consent can be relatively straightforward. For example, settings such as control centres, design practices and offices that involve a small and stable population of participants readily lend themselves to the use of information sheets and consent forms. Nevertheless it is important to be aware that the widespread deployment

of CCTV cameras can mean that participants may have become a little blasé about the differences between CCTV and video recordings made for research, where recordings capture sound as well as images. It is critical that the researcher assumes responsibility for clearly explaining how data is collected and the subsequent use of the materials for research and teaching.

In other situations it may be inappropriate or even impossible to gain written permission from all participants. Gathering data in public and semi-public environments, such as the concourse of stations, city streets, cafes, and museums and galleries, raise additional challenges with regard to informed consent. Even when recording more circumscribed domains, people, from whom written permission has not been secured, may happen to visit. If the researcher is unaware of new people entering the scene and is not on site at the time of recording, it may prove difficult subsequently to establish informed consent in the conventional way.

Researchers can use various techniques to inform those who enter a particular environment that recording is taking place, provide people with the opportunity of finding out more about the research and whether they wish to not participate or have any recordings of them destroyed. These ordinarily require that the researcher be on hand to answer questions, switch off cameras and even to erase parts of a recording. It is also important that any information provided is in such a form that even those rapidly passing through a domain can know what is happening and are provided with the opportunity to withhold consent – to ‘opt out’ of the study.

### Box 2.1 Informed consent

Informed consent is a basic ethical tenet of scientific research on human populations.

*ASA Code of Ethics, 1999: 12*

**Informed** – all pertinent aspects of what is to occur and what might occur are disclosed to the subject and that subject should be able to comprehend this information.

**Consent** – the subject is competent to make a rational and mature judgment and agreement should be voluntary, free from coercion and influence.

(Homan, 1991: 71)

### 2.3 Access in practice

Although there are general concerns to be addressed when seeking permission and consent to record, some issues arise that are related to the particular settings in which the research is undertaken. To discuss some of these specific matters we will review three cases where video-based field studies posed very different challenges in securing access and consent: a study of a complex organisation; a study involving children; and a study in a public, or at least, semi-public, setting.

**Case 1: London Underground – Researching an organisation**

As part of a programme of research concerned with the deployment of advanced technologies we were keen to study a command and control environment that was subject to technological change. The research was supported in part by Rank Xerox Research Laboratories, so it involved potential commercial conflicts of interest. Colleagues in Paris had recently undertaken ethnographic studies of station control on the Paris Metro (Joseph, 1998), and we were keen to complement and extend that research in London. Therefore we contacted London Underground and arranged to meet to discuss potential collaboration.

We held successive meetings with the technology strategy manager and his colleagues and they responded positively to the proposal for a study of technological change. At that stage we left open the question of how the study might be undertaken. They suggested that it would be interesting to consider the introduction of a computerised signalling system into the operation of a number of principal lines, beginning with the Bakerloo Line. Since Rank Xerox were not involved in the design or supply of command and control systems we were able to assure staff that there was no conflict of interest.

A meeting was arranged with senior management on the Bakerloo Line. We presented the general themes that informed our research and why we would like to undertake a preliminary study with London Underground. We stressed that, in the first instance, we would simply undertake a pilot project, just two or three days, involving field observation and, where practical, informal interviews with staff. We would then report back to management and then they could decide whether the research was worthwhile taking further. On this condition they provisionally agreed, but required the agreement of the Unions and personnel in the Line Control Room. Staff and the Unions accepted the proposal of a pilot project and we began the study. Video recording had not been mentioned at this stage.

The first few days of fieldwork were spent largely in the control room before the introduction of the new signalling system. It not only proved fascinating, but we realised that personnel had major concerns both about the new technology that was to be introduced and its implications for their roles and responsibilities. Our preliminary fieldwork provided us with the opportunity to learn of the quite reasonable worries of staff concerning the new system. In our report to senior management we were able to discuss a number of those problems and raise one or two issues concerning the introduction of the new system and its potential consequences.

Management were convinced that it was worthwhile looking at these issues in more detail. Since our concerns reflected many of the worries of personnel, they were keen that we should undertake further research as well. Even at that stage, it was clear that the research was beginning to reveal the complexity of the skills required by staff to manage traffic on the network and the range of events and problems that they faced day-to-day – it was a period in which the Irish Republic Army (IRA) was active in London, which heightened the security measures that were put in place. The complexity of the work enabled us to introduce the idea that it would be of great benefit to video record activities in the Line Control Room. Staff and management happily agreed, with various provisos on access to and use of the data.

After a short period, we realised that we needed multiple cameras to examine communication and collaboration in the control room. Staff and management agreed and we undertook a further phase of data collection in which we used four interlinked cameras. This enabled us to record participants and their screens and diagrams. When we showed video fragments to staff within the control room to discuss the initial findings, they then suggested that it might be worthwhile comparing the Bakerloo Line control room with other control centres on the network. Two of these happened to be located in the same building. They arranged for access, we secured consent from personnel and management and then undertook brief phases of video-recording in these other control centres. Access and data collection continued to progressively evolve so that after a few months we had access to almost all the line control rooms on London Underground and then to station operations rooms, train drivers, surveillance centres and more. The culmination of this developing process of gaining access and consent perhaps was when staff and management agreed to the BBC recording a programme based on the research.

Two points are worth highlighting. Firstly, approval for access was achieved incrementally, allowing time to develop the involvement and trust of relevant stakeholders. Secondly, access was made easier since the interests of the research team resonated with the more practical concerns of the organisation and staff.

#### **Box 2.2 Some ways to foster trust**

- **Take the process of gaining access in stages**  
Develop your understanding of the concerns of the participants to gradually obtain incremental access to the setting.
- **Do not blindly follow ethical guidelines**  
Make sure that they are appropriate for the study and show how you can deal with the specific requirements of video recording.
- **Present video clips and provide reports from previous studies to the participants, to show the kinds of data you will be collecting and the issues that you will be exploring**  
You may find it useful to take a laptop computer, portable video-player (or camcorder) so that you can easily show people clips from previous research.
- **Emphasise your interests in the participants' practices and knowledge**  
You may wish to reiterate that unlike some documentaries and television programmes you are not concerned with the unusual or dramatic but with the ordinary and routine.
- **Emphasise the right to withdraw from a study at any time**  
Participants should be aware that they may request that recordings be erased at anytime. This should all be in the information sheets you provide, but it is worth reiterating.
- **Provide individuals and organisations with copies of reports and papers written about the study**  
It is usually the case that through your research you consider issues that may be relevant to the organisation you are studying. It is often helpful to offer to provide a report or make a presentation that specifically addresses

these more practical or applied issues. At the very least it seems reasonable to disseminate papers based on the research to your hosts.

- **Make it easy for individuals and organisations to contact you**  
Provide all participants with a way to contact you to discuss the research. This could be via your official phone, email account or mobile.
- **Offer to meet again to discuss the research**  
You should always be available to discuss matters further. You can make progress in small steps by first suggesting a brief pilot study or a convenient time when you could collect a small amount of video, so the participants can see what is involved.

### **Case 2: Schools – Recording children**

Video has been widely used for educational research (Goldman et al., 2007a), for example, to explore the interaction between pupils and teachers. Gathering video data involving children, or members of any potentially vulnerable group, raises additional issues. In many countries there are special provisions in legislation and in official ethical guidelines regarding research involving young people. It is important, if you are intending to collect video recordings of children, to be aware of local legislation, guidelines and practice.

Obtaining consent can prove difficult if the children are very young or considered too immature to make a judgment. In these cases a researcher cannot only rely on securing the consent of ‘gatekeepers’ such as teachers, head teachers and the parents of the children (Homan, 1991) but as most recent guidelines emphasise (including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child), it is necessary to explain what you are doing even to the youngest of children in language that they can understand. You need to check that they are willing to be recorded, although with younger children the extent to which they are truly ‘informed’ may prove problematic (Flewitt, 2006). In this regard, gaining consent to video record classroom activities can be time-consuming especially if you wish to record a whole class of children. Permission may well have to be sought from a large and disparate collection of people, including parents, teachers and classroom assistants. It is likely that many will be hard to contact, may not initially respond to your enquiries, and some may give permission whilst others will not.

#### **Box 2.3 Issues to consider when making video recordings of people**

- **Be inclusive about who you involve**  
Try to involve the children, teachers and other carers and parents as much as possible in discussions about your research.
- **Find out if procedures already exist that you can draw upon**  
Many educational institutions have established policies for recording. Also, most teachers and teaching professionals will be familiar with video from their training, so may have useful tips or experiences from which you can learn.

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

- **Develop materials to support your discussions**

These will include letters, information sheets and consent forms written in appropriate styles for teachers, parents and pupils. Note that teaching professionals may be more interested in the methods you are using, whereas parents may be concerned about the potential disruption to teaching and how the data will be disseminated.

- **Consider who should collect the data**

Researching children requires care. If you are unsure about whether you have the experience necessary to deal with the issues that might arise, consider gaining the support of an educational professional or someone with specific skills with children to assist you.

- **Think about the potential consequences of your study**

Existing guidelines on research involving children offer much that it is useful, but these are not a substitute for properly considering the potential hazards and risks.

In a recent study we were interested in how students used paper, books and computer systems in classrooms (Luff et al., 2007). We identified a number of local schools that might be willing to participate in the research and discussed our ideas with the teachers and head teachers at each. Following these discussions it was agreed that we should focus on classes of children aged 9 to 10 years old. We then had further discussions with the teachers of the children and found volunteers who would be happy for recordings to take place in their classrooms. We then obtained formal permission to commence the study from the head teacher on the understanding that we would gain consent from teachers, students and the parents of those children. We discussed with the relevant teachers how this could best be done and they helped prepare the information sheets for parents, the consent forms and the covering letters. It was agreed the letters would be sent to each parent individually from the teacher of the child in question and reflect the usual way teachers informed parents of school activities.

#### **Box 2.4 Example consent letter for parents**

<school address>

Dear <parent's name supplied by school>

I am writing to ask whether you would be willing for your child to participate in a research project being conducted by <researcher's institution>.

The aim of the research project is to explore how children use books and computers for learning. It is hoped that these studies will inform educational practice, provide design recommendations for new technologies, and contribute to social scientific research concerning child interaction. The project is part of a wider initiative investigating new technologies to support educational activities and is funded by <research funding body>.

To carry out this research, <researcher's institution> would like to video a class of children conducting their normal activities during lessons. For example, the video might focus on children working on a computer or a group of children working with books. It would not involve children taking part in any extra activities. This video will allow the researchers at <researcher's institution> to look closely at how children use books and computers in order to complete their tasks. The children are not being measured or tested in any way.

Initially the video will only be viewed by the small team of researchers directly involved in the project. If any of the video is to be shown to a wider research audience then the identities of the children will be protected (their real names will not be used and their faces will be blurred).

The videoing would take place on two or three days for around 1–2 hours on each day, and should not disrupt their school day. The researcher from <researcher's institution> who will video the work is <researcher's name>, who can be contacted at <researcher's address, email and phone number>.

Please feel free to contact me or <researcher's name> with any worries or questions about the video or the research.

If you are willing for your child to participate I would be grateful if you could sign and return the section at the bottom of this letter. If you do not wish your child to participate, they will be able to take part in their lessons as normal but will not be included in the video.

Yours

<teacher's name>

.....  
I am willing for my child to be videoed during their lessons at school for a research project being conducted by <researcher's institution>

Signed.....

A number of parents replied to give consent. However, their children did not correspond to the standard groups into which they were divided for classroom activities. We were only interested in focusing on small groups of three to four students working together at a time. As these working groups were not 'fixed', the teachers were willing to re-organise the groups so that students with completed consent forms could work together.

Prior to the first day of recording we visited the school to discuss the research with all the students. At this stage they obtained explicit consent from those that might be recorded. Given possible absences from class, we could only make the final selection on the day of recording. We focused on one desk of four children and arranged the camera angle so that other children in the class were not in view. Data were edited if children without consent forms entered the scene. As we only required short, maybe 30-second, extracts to develop the analysis, these arrangements proved unproblematic. As there was frequent movement around the class and talk between classmates, analyses of learning activities of longer duration, or involving more students, may have required additional procedures for gaining consent.

The case highlights the special care that needs to be taken when seeking permission to record potentially vulnerable people, and the importance of involving all stakeholders in discussions and negotiations about access. It also highlights the significance of carefully designing information sheets and consent forms with regard to the needs of particular stakeholders.

### **Case 3: Museums – Research in public environments**

It is widely recognised that strictures used to secure informed consent are difficult to follow in undertaking studies of public and semi-public settings. Indeed, the British Psychological Society and the American Sociological Association specify that informed consent is not usually required in public settings (see Box 2.5).

#### **Box 2.5 Informed consent in public settings**

Unless informed consent has been obtained, restrict research based upon observations of public behaviour to those situations in which persons being studied would reasonably expect to be observed by strangers, with reference to local cultural values and to the privacy of persons who, even while in a public space, may believe they are unobserved.

*BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct, 2006: 13*

Sociologists obtain informed consent from research participants, students, employees, clients, or others prior to videotaping, filming, or recording them in any form, unless these activities involve simply naturalistic observations in public places and it is not anticipated that the recording will be used in a manner that could cause personal identification or harm.

*ASA Code of Ethics, 1999: 14*

Although the guidelines are more relaxed, it remains the responsibility of the researcher to be sensitive to the concerns of participants. Even if you plan to record in a public setting where people take photos and video recordings – for example at tourist sites – information about the research should be made available to participants and they should still have the opportunity to decline to participate.

In a series of recent studies of conduct and interaction amongst visitors in museums, galleries and science centres (Heath and vom Lehn, 2004; vom Lehn et al., 2001), it was impossible to gain written permission from the thousands of people who pass through the doors of each museum on a daily basis. Curators, museum directors and education officers were also concerned that the more conventional methods for gaining informed consent would be intrusive and would undermine visitors' experiences. After discussion with visitors, as well as museum staff, it was agreed that we should use an 'opt-out' model of consent (Homan, 1991).

We decided to undertake data collection in only one of the many galleries of the particular museum at any one time. Signs were mounted at the entrance(s) to the gallery, providing information about the research and the recording taking place (see Box 2.6). If visitors had any questions or reservations, the signs invited them to talk to a researcher who was available throughout the period. The signs were mounted on stands that preserved the overall aesthetic of the exhibition but could not be confused with the labels and signs used by the museum.

#### **Box 2.6 Example sign for use in a museum**

<address of research institute>

We are currently undertaking a research project looking at the behaviour of people in museums. We are particularly interested in the ways in which people look at and discuss paintings in <museum>. The project involves close collaboration between researchers at <research institute> and the staff and associates at <museum>.

In order to undertake this study we are currently video- and audio-recording in parts of <name of gallery>. If you have any concerns about being recorded, please inform our researcher or a member of the <museum> staff and the camera will be switched off immediately. If you have been recorded but decide that you would prefer that the recording was destroyed, again, please inform us, and the tape will be wiped.

The material will be used for research and teaching purposes only.  
<names and contact details of principal researchers>

Throughout the study a number of visitors approached us, either because of the signs or seeing the cameras, the microphones or the researcher. Many were interested in the research and wanted to find out more. However, we had very few visitors who were concerned about the recording or who asked for data featuring them to be destroyed (see also, Gutwill, 2003).

It is difficult to anticipate all the questions and concerns members of the public will have when recording in more accessible environments. It is important to remain available – often close to the camera during recording – and willing to discuss the research and allay any concerns. One issue that is often overlooked in public settings is to make people aware that the recordings also capture sound and, most importantly, talk. It is not always apparent to participants that you might be recording what they say. It should be added that in these studies we took care to discuss the research with museum staff, not just senior management but guides and security guards. It was important that staff were also aware they might be recorded and were happy that this should take place.

There are two points worth highlighting. Firstly, that the conventional model of informed consent is not appropriate to all settings, and secondly, it is important to discuss with members of the relevant organisations how best to inform people about the research.

## 2.4 Obtaining ethical approval

To undertake research involving people, or 'human subjects', most universities and research institutions require researchers to obtain formal approval from an ethics committee, institutional review board (IRB) or similar. The process typically requires a written proposal reviewed by a committee. In some universities the process applies to all research projects, whether they are carried out by undergraduate students or by experienced research staff, whether they are funded or not, and irrespective of whether they take a few weeks or many years.

Approval is normally granted for a specific duration and if the project runs over that period an extension has to be secured. The formal approval process is intended to ensure that before any research is carried out by members of the institution, that ethical matters have been considered and addressed, that the research is safe and that it respects the autonomy and privacy of the participants. In some cases, for example, in undertaking research in health care organisations, it can also prove necessary to submit a formal application to the institution in question or an overarching body to secure ethical approval for the research. Even if your own institution or the organisation that oversees the research site does not have an explicit policy on ethics, it is important to consider the ethical issues that might arise.

### Box 2.7 Internet links to ethical guidelines and procedures

- British Psychological Society (2006):  
[http://www.bps.org.uk/the-society/code-of-conduct/code-of-conduct\\_home.cfm](http://www.bps.org.uk/the-society/code-of-conduct/code-of-conduct_home.cfm)
- British Sociological Association: Visual Sociology statement of ethical practice (2006):  
[http://www.visualsociology.org.uk/about/ethical\\_statement.php](http://www.visualsociology.org.uk/about/ethical_statement.php)
- Economic & Social Research Council 'Research Ethics Framework' (2005):  
[www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC\\_Re\\_Ethics\\_Frame\\_tcm6-11291.pdf](http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk/ESRCInfoCentre/Images/ESRC_Re_Ethics_Frame_tcm6-11291.pdf)
- American Sociological Association Code of Ethics (1999):  
<http://www2.asanet.org/members/ecoderev.html>
- General Medical Council *Making and Using Visual and Audio Recordings of Patients* (2002):  
[http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/current/library/making\\_audiovisual.asp](http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/current/library/making_audiovisual.asp)
- Market Research Society Code of Conduct (2005):  
<http://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/codeconduct.htm>
- Social Research Association 'Ethical Guidelines' (2003):  
<http://www.the-sra.org.uk/ethical.htm>
- UK Data Protection Act (1998):  
<http://www.opsi.gov.uk/ACTS/acts1998/19980029.htm>
- UN Convention on the rights of the child:  
<http://www.unicef.org/crc/>
- Wellcome Trust Guidelines on Good Research Practice (2005):  
<http://www.wellcome.ac.uk/About-us/Policy/Policy-and-position-statements/WTD002757.htm>

See also the International Compilation of Human Subject Research Protections document which has been compiled by the Office for Human Research Protections, United States Department of Health and Human Services and gives listings for Research Ethics Committees in 72 countries (<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/>).

Research ethics committees may consist of members of your department or discipline, but increasingly they also include academics from other fields and in some cases lay members drawn from the general public. It is important therefore that your methods and approach are clear to a non-expert and that the reasons for using video are convincing. In many cases, ethics committees will not be familiar with research that uses video and it will be necessary to provide background to the approach and examples of video-based studies, preferably in the same field of application. The approval process often allows supplementary materials to be provided with the application including, for example, your original research proposal, information sheets you will give to participants and sample consent forms and these can provide an opportunity to clarify your approach. The professional associations for psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, for educational, social or medical researchers all specify ethical codes and principles (see Box 2.7). These can be an invaluable resource in choosing and legitimising your approach with regard to issues of ethics.

A number of the questions that arise in conventional application forms used by ethics committees will not necessarily be relevant to your research, but the use of video does raise issues that may need to be addressed. These include the following:

- ***Does the study involve potentially vulnerable participants or those unable to give informed consent? As well as children this includes people with learning difficulties, your own students, over-researched groups or people in care?*** In all these cases consider how you can obtain consent without subjecting participants to undue pressure, for example, it may be worth considering the use of intermediaries, including gatekeepers or carers, or providing additional time for people to reflect on and withdraw from your study.
- ***Will participants take part in the study without their consent or knowledge or will deception of any sort be involved (this might, for example, be the covert observation of people in non-public places)?*** The normal principle is that informed consent is obtained from all participants prior to the study. Deception should not be used without very good reason. If some form of informed consent cannot be secured prior to recording, then consider how you can provide information following data collection and, if relevant, provide the opportunity for participants to have materials destroyed.
- ***Does the study involve the discussion of sensitive topics affecting individual respondents (e.g. sexual activity, drug use, death or illegal activities)?*** The confidentiality and privacy of the participants needs to be strictly maintained and you should ensure that members of the research team have the skills and experience to deal with sensitive topics that might arise. Prior to undertaking any study you should consider how you might deal with materials that concern illegal or improper activities by participants. These matters are of common concern to ethics committees and guidelines are available.

- ***Could the study induce stress or anxiety, or produce humiliation, cause harm or negative consequences beyond the risks encountered in normal life?*** If, as part of the research, participants undertake particular tasks or discuss matters that could prove potentially humiliating to themselves or others (for example, their friends, family or colleagues) then clear strictures are required that might further constrain access to and use of the data.

Although ethical procedures differ from committee to committee, some questions recur for those collecting and using video recordings. The following might be useful to consider when completing an ethical approval form.

#### **Legal and organisational considerations**

You may need to state who has rights to the data. This could include the researcher, funding body, academic institution, host setting, a collaborating organisation and the participants. Normally it is the researcher. However, you should be wary if others, like funders or management within the participating organisations, request the right to access the recordings. The funding body, for example, may hold a data archive that requires principal investigators to submit materials and for use by the broader research community. Or, for example, senior management of the organisation in which you are undertaking the research may request copies of recordings, if only for running a training session or giving a presentation. It can be difficult to envisage all the circumstances where you might be asked to provide copies of your video recordings but in establishing access and securing ethical approval you have to avoid possibilities of being subject to unreasonable requests in the future.

It will often prove necessary to refuse requests to provide copies of your video recordings. For example, we receive numerous requests to provide other researchers with copies of our substantial corpus of materials, where the original agreement stipulates that copies will not be made available to people outside the research team. In this regard, it is worth being careful when making presentations of your research. It is not unusual for people to request permission to record a talk or receive copies of the slides and associated video data (this is discussed further in Chapter 6). In some circumstances it may seem churlish not to respond positively to a request for material, for example, in a case where there is genuine commitment to use the data for the benefit of members of the organisation (an organisation that may have generously given you access). However, first and foremost it is critical to re-seek permission from participants, that they are happy for the selected materials to be made available. Also carefully review the material in question to ensure that there is nothing untoward or potentially embarrassing. This may include jokes or discussions about fellow members of the organisation, or about unexpected visitors. In one case we inadvertently collected personal comments concerning a senior minister of the government who had attended an event at London Underground. This was deleted.

#### **Storage, access and archiving**

In securing ethical approval you may well be required to specify how long the data will be kept. These strictures can undermine one of the significant advantages

of video recordings, namely the ways in which they can be re-used and subject to a range of analytic interests. Care needs to be taken therefore in preparing an application to an ethics committee to stress the possibility that the data will be used to address a range of substantive and analytic concerns. In certain circumstances, it is possible to secure permission to continue to use the data beyond the duration of the initial project arguing that it will be used to further develop analysis and prepare papers and publications. In other circumstances, you may need to reapply to the relevant ethics committee to continue to use the data. If you are considering using the data beyond the period of the project then you should make sure you have agreement from participants when you initially collect your data, since it can prove difficult to re-establish contact after a period away from the setting.

In cases where you use the recordings for a longer duration, particularly if the material is to form part of an historic archive, it is worthwhile discussing copyright approval with the participants. You might wish to refer to the guidelines offered to oral historians when considering archives of personal materials (Ward, 2003) or the experiences of the Qualidata archive in relation to consent agreements for archiving qualitative data (Corti et al., 2000).

#### **Box 2.8 Guidelines for storing and distributing data**

- Always make copies of all your original recordings and store them in a separate location.
- Store all data and collections in a secure location. If they are on computer they should be password protected.
- Do not place data on public websites unless you have explicit agreement from all the participants.
- Only provide copies of data to those who are authorised to use it as specified in the original agreements.
- If you have agreement to present fragments to research audiences, this may not include presentations being made available on stored media or websites. Be careful when distributing copies of your presentation material.
- Similarly, be careful when requests are made by others, like data archives for your material, ensure that this does not contravene your agreements with participants.

#### **Confidentiality of Data <sample answer for an ethical approval form>**

The data are only to be used for teaching and research purposes, and are kept locked in a cupboard at all times. Data on the computer are guarded by password access and are wiped from the hard drive as soon as they are no longer needed. Video data that are collected will be kept for seven years in a secure location and then destroyed.

***Preserving privacy and the anonymity of participants***

Video presents distinctive challenges for ensuring the privacy not only of the individuals that may be recorded but also for any organisations that may be involved. The names of individuals or organisations may be voiced, people will be recognisable, institutional logos may be visible, and confidential information may well be recorded. You may also, even inadvertently, record personal phone conversations, gossip, discussions of an organisation's strategy and the like – material that it may be critical to anonymise or even remove.

In some cases it can be difficult to ensure that participants or settings cannot be identified from the materials that are published. For example, in our studies of auctions, the name of the auction house is sometimes written in large letters on the rostrum from which the auctioneer conducts the sale. Also given the relatively small number of companies that are selling pictures worth more than two million dollars, even if the name of the auction house is concealed, it is not difficult to identify the organisation that might be involved. In our studies of control centres on London Underground, we realised early on that it would be impossible to conceal the identity of the organisation or even the particular control rooms that we studied. In these circumstances it is important to make it clear to participants and the organisation that it may not be possible to preserve their anonymity.

In many cases, however, preserving the anonymity of the setting or organisation will be unproblematic and it is unlikely that individual participants will be familiar to people who see the data. Nevertheless there remains a 'duty of care', to avoid showing or sharing material that might, however inadvertently, threaten the privacy of individuals or prove invidious or embarrassing.

For publication, there are conventional ways to anonymise transcripts and references to people, places and organisations through the use of pseudonyms. There are also various techniques that can be employed to modify images. Standard software packages can be used to blur or pixellate faces, logos and the like (see Chapter 6 for ways of doing this). Alternatively, the images can be replaced with tracings or drawings that selectively exclude elements that might enable recognition of particular individuals. Where practical, it is often best to discuss these issues with the participants and together come up with a procedure that they will be happy with.

However, these procedures can severely constrain research. It would be difficult, for example, to present an analysis of visible orientation in a medical consultation if it is required that actions of interest are obscured in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants. It is critical, therefore, that in securing consent, you recognise the implications for the type of analysis you can undertake and for the ways in which your observations and findings can be presented and published.

Many participants will allow researchers to record and even make copies of the documents that they use and will grant permission to record what is displayed on computer screens. It is important to be aware that in collecting such materials it is possible that you will have access to personal data of clients, customers or other people associated with the organisation; data that in some cases, you may well have not expected to collect. It remains the investigator's responsibility to secure agreement on the use of all private information and to make sure that data are stored securely

and cannot be accessed by anyone outside the immediate research team. If in doubt, discuss the matter with the participants and other relevant members of the organisation.

Given changes in organisations and personnel, it can be difficult to renegotiate consent to participate in your research, so it is unwise to assume that once you have gained consent to record you will be able to relax any conditions you have previously set. It may be more appropriate to make participants aware of the nature of your analysis and secure explicit agreement to present particular materials. Rather than collecting data that you will later find to be unusable, it is better to collect a small amount of usable data that you can present and publish. You will need to provide information concerning the management of these issues in your application to an ethics committee.

**Anonymity of Participants <sample answer for an ethical approval form>**

Participant's identities are anonymised in the data records whenever they are published. At the earliest possible stage, names on any transcripts are transformed into pseudonyms. Where possible, all reference to particular institutions and organisations will be anonymised. Where complete anonymity of the institution is not practical, agreement from relevant participants and members of the respective organisation(s) will be secured.

***Dissemination and presentation***

One of the advantages of video, particularly digital video, is that it can be easily copied – often with no loss of quality. Copies can be made on a variety of formats including CD-ROMs, DVDs, portable disks and quite easily uploaded to websites. This makes it relatively simple to share data with other researchers. The flip side of this is that it is easy to lose control over who has access to your data (see Hindmarsh, 2008). If you make copies of data available to others then they can similarly copy the data for distribution. It is unlikely, however, that they will know the details of the agreement you made with the participants, and may well be unaware of the informal, tacit assumptions that enabled data collection to proceed. Despite the temptation to share material and show generosity to fellow researchers and the broader research community, it is advisable to be careful when making copies, even for the closest of colleagues. If copies are made, and are part of the original agreement, then it is critical to make sure that colleagues are clearly aware of the agreements that apply to the data and its reproduction.

In this regard uploading data to public websites is particularly problematic, since there is no effective control over who may then obtain copies of recordings from such websites. Even if not intended for public use it is important to use passwords to protect access to websites that include data collections. More generally, if you intend to distribute or publish CD-ROMs, DVDs or share data, make it clear in your agreement with your participants. If you are in doubt as to

who will be able to access data and whether it can be subsequently copied, it is best not to make it available. This may run contrary to the interests of your fellow researchers, students, or funding bodies, but your agreement with participants is your principal responsibility.

On the other hand, it is important to secure an agreement that will not undermine your ability to analyse the recordings and present and publish your findings. You should be concerned with the privacy of the individuals and the organizations you study, but make sure that this does not restrict your own obligation to present and publish your findings. As with any research, you should be sensitive to any agreement with an organisation that requires their consent prior to publication. It is good practice to distribute to organisations material that you wish to publish and ask for their comments and feedback. This can help correct inaccuracies and errors, but you need to consider carefully giving them the right to stop publication or to enforce changes. We always find it best at the outset of the project to state that it will be necessary to present at least brief video fragments to the research community, for example, at conferences and colloquia, and to students in lectures and classes.

## 2.5 Project planning

Many of the issues and problems that arise in planning video-based studies are not unlike those that arise more generally with qualitative research. It is important to identify clear aims, objectives and research questions and to consider how best to divide the project into discrete stages or phases. Furthermore, it is useful to establish key milestones, to clarify the criteria that will be used to assess the final outcomes of the project and to consider how the research might contribute to theory, method and practice. Many texts on research methods discuss these issues and funding bodies usually encourage them in their guidelines for research grant applications (see for example ESRC, NSF). There are, however, aspects of video-based research that raise distinctive issues and challenges and that require special attention.

The approach to gaining access that we described earlier in this chapter is somewhat idiomatic of the broader approach to video-based studies. That is to say, it is useful to undertake data collection incrementally, in a series of small steps or phases. As discussed, it might be necessary to build from fieldwork towards video recording to develop the trust of individuals and organisations and that this should be done in stages. Also, and as we shall discuss in Chapter 3, it is useful to experiment with different camera angles, camera combinations, microphones and the like. This again requires an incremental approach. Also, and maybe most importantly, progressing in an incremental, step-by-step manner suits the qualitative approach that underpins this use of video recordings.

For instance, it is tempting to start to make notes on all that has been recorded, to transcribe the data and then begin some kind of categorisation and identification of themes. However, even when making brief notes and rough transcripts it is likely that an hour of material could take at least three to five hours; it is time-consuming and needs to be taken into account when planning a project. Indeed, rather than adopt a conventional model of research in which data collection is followed by data

analysis, video is more suited to an iterative approach where data is collected in brief phases – maybe one to three days at a time – and then subjected to transcription and systematic review. Preliminary observations and insights that derive from these early phases of analysis can provide the resources with which to decide what further data should be collected and what form that data should take: the timing, framing and focus of the recording. So, rather than undertake a single period of data collection followed by data analysis, it is worthwhile undertaking successive phases of data collection interdispersed with analysis. In this way, data collection can be sensitive to analytic themes and issues that emerge during the course of the research as well as maximising the quality and relevance of the recordings.

This more iterative approach to data collection also facilitates the involvement of colleagues at early stages of the research. Unlike more conventional fieldwork where individual researchers are expected to spend extended periods of time in the field before reporting on and discussing their observations and findings, video provides the resources with which to review and discuss the project from the earliest of stages. Data analysis workshops, informal presentations, simply showing fragments of data to colleagues, supervisors and members of the research community can support serious discussion of the research, which fields of inquiry might be pursued, the advantages or disadvantages of other ways of gathering data (or even other settings that might be relevant) and even the analytic issues that might form the focus of further research.

So rather than being segmented in terms of project development, data collection followed by analysis, we suggest that it may be more appropriate to interdisperse analysis with successive stages of data collection. For example:

- Preliminary: Prepare project proposal, secure access and apply for ethical approval.
- Outcome:** *Final project proposal, access secured and ethical approval.*
- First stage: Prepare for data collection, undertake preliminary fieldwork and a brief period of audio-visual recording.
- Outcome:** *A preliminary corpus of data, an evaluation of the material, preliminary observations and a strategy for further data collection that may include further fieldwork as well as audio-visual recording.*
- Second stage: Review of data, selection of fragments and transcription and analysis of particular activities.
- Outcome:** *A preliminary catalogue of key events and activities in the data, a corpus of transcripts and a report documenting the analysis of particular actions and activities.*
- Third stage: Collect further data, where relevant, transcribe data, undertake review of new materials, develop and refine analysis.
- Outcome:** *Catalogue data and develop the corpus of transcripts. More thorough analytic report showing refined analysis of fragments with increasing and developing sophistication of argument and analysis, tied to issues in the recent literature and reflections on the implications that can be derived for the study.*
- Fourth stage: Final writing, dissemination and presentation of analyses.
- Outcome:** *Articles, presentations and discussion of methodological, conceptual and practical implications.*

**Box 2.9 Example project timetable**

A video-based study of design practice:  
Duration of the project: 30 months.

**1. Stage I: Preparation (months 1–3)**

- Undertake a brief review of related studies of design to assess themes and issues that have been addressed, particularly focusing on those that have adopted a naturalistic approach and used video.
- Establish contact with design companies and meet to clarify the approach with participants and secure agreement and dates for initial data collection.
- Also, undertake a brief survey of the design practices to assess where to begin collecting video and any special requirements for equipment.
- Acquire video-recording equipment and gain familiarity with it.

**2. Stage II: Preliminary fieldwork and data collection (months 3–9)**

- Begin fieldwork in principal site, initially through field observations and interviews with members of the design practice.
- As soon as practical, commence recording, including capturing general shots of the site (work areas, technologies, example documents and resources) and collect sample recording of a focused collaboration (say one hour).
- Discuss recording (camera positions, sound levels) and initial observations with research team. Return to setting for two to three days' recording, selecting several locations and design teams, and gather recordings of design discussions.
- Review recordings, select fragments and discuss fragments with research colleagues.

*Data Workshop I: report initial fieldwork and data collection to close research colleagues. Gather suggestions for further relevant data collection and to support initial development of typology of activities (month 4).*

- Repeat short periods of recording, selecting and transcribing fragments of design discussions, and writing reports of preliminary analysis.
- Extended literature review given themes emerging from analysis.
- Undertake some recordings of other work activities in the design practice (e.g. presentations to clients, project-planning activities, mark up of detailed design changes and using computer systems).

*Data Workshop II: propose and discuss initial themes for analysis with wider research team. Gather suggestions for other issues to focus on and materials to collect (month 9).*

**3. Stage III: detailed investigation (months 10–24)**

- Principal fieldwork and data collection – again through successive short periods of recording.
- In-depth analysis of selected video recordings and associated data. Detailed transcription of fragments.
- Reports of extended analysis of collections on particular themes and issues, related to literature and practical concerns of the project.

- Further comparative or exploratory fieldwork (say, of other design practices, clients or collaboration with other organisations and professionals).

*Data Workshops III–VI: to present analysis of fragments and refine analysis, to discuss analysis with key participants and colleagues outside the research team (months 15, 18, 24).*

#### **4. Stage IV: Dissemination (months 20–30)**

- Preparation of reports, papers, and draft publications.

*Data Workshop VII: Present analysis to external parties (e.g. practitioners, external researchers and other organisations) (month 28).*

The problems and issues that arise in undertaking projects that use video data make this kind of structure advisable, and the particular qualities of video make it possible. While it may not be the conventional way in which research projects are organised in the social sciences, it would not be unfamiliar a number of other disciplines. Nevertheless, in any project proposal it will require some explanation (see also, Sandelowski and Barroso, 2003).

#### **Key points**

- Gaining access normally requires the cooperation and agreement of a range of people – not only participants themselves, but also key stakeholders in particular organisations or institutions.
- Consider the concerns of participants when undertaking data collection and when presenting and publishing research based on video recordings.
- Gaining and maintaining ethical approval often remains relevant throughout the lifecycle of your research.
- Consult the ethical guidelines of the professional bodies and associations that relate to your research.
- Consent needs to be carefully tailored with regard to the characteristics of the setting and the concerns of the participants themselves.
- Where possible and appropriate organise your research through successive phases of data collection interdispersed with analysis.

#### **RECOMMENDED READING**

- Michael Hornsby-Smith (1993) provides a useful overview of general issues and problems of access in social research, and Mark Saunders et al. (2007, Chapter 6) consider a range of useful strategies for negotiating access to firms and organisations.

*(Continued)*

(Continued)

- Roger Homan (1991) and Melanie Mauthier et al. (2002) are thorough reviews of ethical issues in social research.
- Sharon Derry (2007) and Rosie Flewitt (2006) include useful discussions of the distinctive problems and concerns of undertaking video-based research in classrooms.
- Margarete Sandelowski and Julie Barroso (2003) present an informative piece on the distinctive challenges of writing proposals for qualitative research. They annotate one of their successful funding applications and draw out some broad principles.
- The Faculty of Social Sciences at the University Lancaster hosts a valuable and accessible website containing background, discussion and guidance on a range of ethical issues (<http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fass/resources/ethics/>).

### EXERCISE

Write a three-page project proposal for a three-month video-based study of your choice. It should be divided into 5 sections

1. *Aims and objectives*
2. *Background*
3. *Methods*
4. *Approach*
5. *Intended outcomes and dissemination*