



Guide to Participant Observation

Preamble

The Research Ethics Committee of the University of Basel (KFE) is committed to promote responsible research and review the ethical acceptability of research projects conducted at the University of Basel. In view of the new Regulations of the KFE, participant observation studies must as of now be submitted to and approved by the Research Ethics Committee (Regulations § 3 Ziff. 2 lit. a-e [DE/EN](#)).

The KFE aims with this Guide to Participant Observation to provide good ethics and data protection practices for the researchers of the University of Basel. Participant observation studies raise unique opportunities for insight but also challenges to research ethics.

The present guide follows national and international ethical guidelines as well as reflections for responsible research in the social sciences, e.g. [Swiss Sociological Association](#) (2007), [Swiss Anthropological Association](#) (2011), the EU Guidelines on [Ethics in Social Sciences and Humanities](#) (2021), the EU Guidance on [Serious and Complex Ethics Issues](#) (2021), the EUI Guide on [Good Data Protection Practice in Research](#) (2022), and the Canadian Statement on [Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans](#) (2022).

Researchers are asked to adhere to existing national and international guidelines of their disciplines and academic communities. In case of uncertainties, they are invited to seek the advice of the [KFE](#).

I What is Participant Observation?

Participant observation is a method in the social sciences with which researchers intend to gain a holistic overview of the studied context through engagement in, and observation of, the setting to describe its population, social environments, processes and relationships.

II Research Ethics Guidelines

How to handle informed consent for participant observation?

Researchers are invited to seek consent from the participants to observe, and participate in activities as well as to collect observed participants' personal data. In justified cases (e.g. covert observation, see below) informed consent may not be required. Researchers can contact the [KFE](#) and seek advice in order to assess the appropriateness of their informed consent process.

In many participant observation venues, it is often challenging to gain formal informed consent from all those with whom the researchers might interact, let alone all those they might observe.

Answering the questions below will help you adapt the formality of your informed consent procedures to the needs of your study and respectfully guarantee the rights of your research participants:



a. How public and private is the participant observation venue?

The necessity of informed consent depends upon the level of privacy of the observed setting. Observing fully public settings might therefore not require consent. In research involving observation of human acts or behaviors in natural environments or virtual settings, researchers are invited to explain the need for an exception to the general requirement for consent. The KFE's approval of research without consent from individuals being observed is based upon the justification provided by the researcher and appropriate privacy protection.

Observation of people in a completely public environment might not require consent. In this case, the KFE recommends researchers to explain that their study does not alter the usual behavior of the people under scrutiny and that their privacy is respected.

b. What kind of data will you be collecting, and how will you analyze it?

Social interactions range from those with little potential for ethical concern to those raising serious ethical challenges. In some sensitive research settings in which vulnerable participants are unwilling or unable to provide written consent, alternative ways are permitted, such as oral consent and presence of witnesses. Please note the importance to document the used procedures to obtain the participants' consent.

c. How much should you disclose about who you are and what you are doing?

When conducting participant observation, researchers should be discreet enough about who they are and what they are doing so that normal activity is not disrupted, yet open enough that the observed population do not feel that their privacy is compromised by the researchers' presence. It is recommended to inform relevant gatekeepers (community members in positions of official or unofficial authority) as to their presence and purpose. There are no formal rules about disclosing their involvement in a research project while in casual conversation with community members, but it is usually advisable to do so.

d. How do you maintain confidentiality during participant observation?

The KFE recommends researchers involved in participant observation to protect the identities of the people they observe or with whom they interact, even if informally. Maintaining confidentiality means ensuring that particular individuals can never be linked to the data they provide.

Sometimes, researchers develop informal personal relationships with key informants. If that happens, it is essential that no personal information is included in the actual participant observation data. If you are unsure whether information they provide is appropriate for your official field notes, ask for their permission and contact the KFE for advice.

Protecting participants' confidentiality also requires that researchers do not disclose personal characteristics that could allow others to guess the identities of people involved in the research project.

Risk assessment

A list of potential sources of psychological, physical or social danger for the researchers and the participants should be established. It is recommended that researchers complete the [KFE Risk Assessment Plan](#) in order to assess more accurately the overall risk-benefit ratio. If the risks are judged disproportionate to the scientific benefits, they should consider a safer venue and use a less risky approach or, in the worst case, abandoning the line of inquiry altogether.



Covert observation

Covert observation refers to an observation method carried out without the explicit awareness and agreement of the observed participants. It is important to reflect upon the meaning of public and private in the contexts where the study is conducted.

Where no personal information is collected, consent is not required. Where personal information is collected, the [KFE](#) recommends researchers to ponder on whether covert research justifies an exception to the requirement to seek prior consent. Researchers and the [KFE](#) can take together the necessary safety steps to ensure that the privacy of the individual is protected in accordance with the law in the absence of consent. Where no consent is sought, researchers and the [KFE](#) can also consider whether debriefing is possible, practicable and appropriate.

III Research Data Management

In conformity with the [Principles for Research Data Management](#) adopted by the University of Basel in 2020, the researchers of the University of Basel adhere to good scientific practices regarding the generation, processing, publication and use of research data.

The [Research Data Management Network of the University of Basel](#) provides useful recommendations and support for researchers to plan and manage their research data on following issues:

- Collect and analyze data
- Preserve & store data
- Publish & share data
- Discover & re-use data

IV Points of contact

The main points of contact for information and advice on further research ethics and data protection issues are:

- [Office of the KFE](#)
- [Office of the DPO](#)

This Guide has been aligned with the new Regulations of the Research Ethics Committee ([DE/EN](#)). It replaces the first version of the Guide (Version 1.0 May 2023).

Basel, October 2025