

3. Informed Consent

Informed consent is one of the core ethical principles of conducting research with human participants and with named data. It is embodied in ethics guidelines, including the [ESRC's Research Ethics Framework](#) in which three of its six core principles are:

- Research should be conducted with integrity and transparency
- The rights and dignity of individuals and groups should be respected
- Wherever possible, participation should be voluntary and appropriately informed

Informed consent is regarded as so important because it respects the autonomy of the participants, and because it protects their welfare (the individual being best placed to judge whether something is unduly risky or harmful to them).

There are three main elements to ensuring consent:

1. Adequate appropriate information to make an informed decision.
2. Voluntariness (with no coercion or undue influence).
3. Competence and/or autonomy.

Any process which lacks one or more of these elements is unable to fulfil the principle of informed consent. In situations where the principle of informed consent cannot be fulfilled, a justification for this must be provided. Only in exceptional circumstances will Northumbria University support research that does not maintain the principle of informed consent. Some of the issues which arise for people conducting research, whilst maintaining the principle of informed consent are:

Adequate Information

There are some forms of research which cannot be conducted without compromising the element of adequate information to make an informed decision. For example, knowledge of the purpose of the study may influence the behaviour of the participant but covert research violates the principles of informed consent and may invade privacy. The British Sociological Association recognises this tension and recommends that as far as possible informed consent should be maintained but that covert methods may be justified in certain circumstances. Further guidance on this issue is available from the British Sociological Association which can be found [here](#) and the [Economic and Social Research Council \(ESRC\)](#).

Voluntariness

There are two types of influence which could lead to consent being compromised: coercion (use of force or threats) and manipulation (emotional persuasion, withholding or distorting information). However, at times it can be hard to distinguish between these influences and the acceptable rational persuasion of accurate information. The following are issues which could give rise to concern:

- Improper use of the researcher's relationship to gain consent (for example, where the researcher also provides a professional service to the participant).
- Manipulative presentation of the information.
- Use of financial or other incentives or inducements to encourage people to take part in the research.

Competence and/or autonomy

In order to provide informed consent, potential participants need to have the ability to: understand and retain relevant information; weigh up the information and make a decision without undue influence; and communicate their consent or refusal. The responsibility rests with the researchers to present information in a way that is accessible to potential participants. There are some situations in which this is not possible. Further detailed guidance in this area can be found in chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this handbook.

Informed Consent and Ethnography: Observations

Ethnography is the study of human behaviour in the natural settings in which people live. An important aspect to ethnographic research is building researcher-participant relationships based on trust. The process of informed consent may therefore be continuous, verbal, and incremental throughout the life of the research.

Consequently, gaining written informed consent for ethnographic research on individuals, communities, groups, and organisations, is often problematic. Although informed consent is preferred, under some circumstances it is either difficult to gain written consent and/or is not conducive to the efficacy of the research. For instance, informed consent might not be possible if:

1. Gaining informed consent would change the behaviour of those being studied and would therefore distort the data;
2. Access to the groups or communities might be prevented if the researcher's aims and methods were known;
3. Large populations might make it difficult to gain written consent (whole villages, for example);
4. Language/literacy difficulties might make written consent impossible.

Ethnographers recognise that there are alternative forms of consent, and these must always be sought where possible. For example, gatekeepers and translators can be used and verbal consent can be captured on video/audio tape.

Consultancy Projects

At the present time, consultancy projects do not require ethical approval. However, if you anticipate the consultancy project will generate bona fide research outputs then ethical approval will be required.