

REB Guidelines for Collecting Data with Groups

Introduction

Research can benefit from the collection of data using methods such as focus groups, world cafes, appreciative inquiry, summit, group interviews, Delphi groups, Q-sorts, plenary sessions, etc. However, these techniques raise number of specific ethical concerns that must be addressed in the research design. The purpose this document is to provide guidelines for ethically conducting research with groups.¹

The [Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans \(TCPS 2014\)](#) discusses three core principles of ethical research. Ethical considerations for collecting data with groups are discussed in relation to these three principles, below.

1) Respect for Persons – Consent Shall be Free (Voluntary), Informed, and Ongoing

“The voluntariness of consent is important because it respects human dignity and means that individuals have chosen to participate in research according to their own values, preferences, and wishes” (TCPS 2014, article 3.1). Appropriate recruitment of participants is critical for ensuring the free and fully-informed consent of participants. In order for consent to be fully informed, participants must be made aware of the purpose of the study, how the data will be managed, and the risks involved (see TCPS 2014 Article 3.2 for a summary of information that should be communicated to potential participants).

Researchers must be aware that it is sometimes not ethically possible to associate their research with group activities that would be conducted regardless of whether the research were to take place. Generally, unless the group activity is being convened specifically for the research, in order for data to be collected from the group, every person participating in the group would need to consent to participate in the research. Declining to participate in the research must not prevent someone from participating in a group activity that they would otherwise be able to participate in (discussed further below). Moreover, researchers may not record group discussions without the consent of all who are engaged, or who would like to engage, in the group activity.

Additional considerations/questions include:

- How will consent information be communicated to potential participants, and how will consent be documented?
- How and up until what point in the research process will participants be able to withdraw from the study? In the event that a participant withdraws, will it be possible to distinguish between data for which consent has been provided and data for which consent has been withdrawn?

¹ In this document, “collecting data in with groups” means collecting data with two or more people at the same time, which may be in-person (live), mediated live through technology, mediated asynchronously (not live) through technology, or collecting participant responses to a webinar or blog, or a combination of these techniques.

- Will participants have an opportunity to review the recordings, transcripts, or notes derived from the group activity?
- What is the nature of the relationship, if any, between the researcher and participants, and is there a risk that this relationship might be perceived as undue influence to participate?

2) Concern for Welfare – Anonymity and Confidentiality

Anonymity and confidentiality of information cannot be guaranteed when data is collected with groups. The researcher may promise not to disclose the identity of participants and/or some types of information in the products of the research. However, the researcher has no control over what participants may later disclose. Research involving group data collection is neither anonymous nor confidential. The identity of participants and information shared is known to all participants.

It is therefore critical that researchers do not overstate the extent to which participation would be anonymous and information would be confidential. While information letters and consent forms may indicate that the researcher will not disclose the identity of participants in the products of the research, there is no way to ensure that group participants will not disclose the identity of other participants or what was discussed during group discussions. Collecting data with groups thus generally creates more risk to participants than other methods, such as one-on-one interviews.

Researchers should therefore have a sound rationale for collecting data with groups, particularly when the research engages with potentially sensitive and private topics. Is the increased risk justified? Could the research goals be accomplished using other, less risky, methods? Provided that there are compelling reasons to employ group data collection techniques, a number of strategies can be used to mitigate risk to participants, such as:

- Ensure that participants are fully informed of the limitations to anonymity and confidentiality;
- If appropriate, ensure that participants are not identified in the products of the research by using pseudonyms or other coding technique (or, alternatively, gain the consent of participants to be identified in the products of the research);
- Have all participants sign a confidentiality agreement in which they promise not to disclose the identity of other participants, or information shared during group discussions (or include this as part of the consent form);
- Use a consent form that allows participants to indicate whether they consent for the group discussion/s to be recorded, and whether they consent to being quoted in the products of the research (e.g. checkboxes);
- Provide an opportunity for participants to review the video, transcript or notes taken at the meeting/s, and provide an opportunity for participants to withdraw any or all statements they made during the meeting/s; and
- Ensure that participants have an opportunity to withdraw from the study after the meeting/s, including the withdrawal of information that they shared at the meeting/s.

The higher the risk of harm to participants, the greater the requirement for the mitigation and management of risk. Group data collection methods are often not appropriate for researching subject matter that raise significant risks of social harm.

3) Justice

As was noted earlier, ethical concerns are raised when researchers attempt to collect data from group activities that would be taking place regardless of whether the research was taking place, such as with town-hall meetings, school clubs, faculty forums, etc. Foremost among these concerns is that by attaching a research initiative to an ongoing group activity, the research may place participants in a position of having to choose whether to consent to participate in the research or not to engage in group process at all. Declining to consent to participate in research must not prevent people from engaging in group activities that would otherwise be available.

Three significant challenges are thus raised in situations where a researcher proposes to collect data from a group activity that would be taking place regardless of the research: 1) people must be permitted to engage in the group activity even if they do not consent to participate in the research; 2) because the data is being generated by the group (discussions) and not individuals, it is often difficult to differentiate between data for which consent has been given and data for which consent has not been given; and 3) strategies that rely upon anonymity and confidentiality are inappropriate in group contexts because no such guarantees can be made. Accordingly, the consent of all member of the group are generally required in order for the research to proceed.

Where the group activity would take place regardless of the research, it is critical that recruitment materials clearly communicate that members of the group will not be excluded from the group activity if they choose not to participate in the research. For this reason it is also critical that the recruitment materials clearly distinguish between group activities that would proceed regardless of whether the research proceeds, and the research, which would proceed only with the consent of all members of the group.

Convening a group activity that is entirely devoted to generating research data avoids some of the concerns outlined above. Researchers are therefore encourage to carefully consider two questions:

- 1) Is it necessary for the research to attempt to “tag onto” an ongoing group activity, rather than initiate a separate group activity devoted to generating research data; and
- 2) Given the increased risks and challenges, is using a group data collection technique really justified?