BOOKLET 43

Griffith University Research Ethics Manual

Ethical issues in case study research

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Contents

1.0 Introduction

In many discipline areas the case study is an important and popular research strategy that is typified by multiple sources of information, and a focus on the specifics of the parties and the context.

Case studies can involve a range of different research methods and approaches, rich sources of data as well as data collection techniques. Case studies can involve qualitative and/or quantitative elements. Such research can raise significant and potentially serious ethical issues. Even though the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007 updated 2018)* (see 2.0) does not contain specific guidance on the design and conduct of case study research, the University believes that it is important that researchers are provided with a reference point for such work. This Booklet of the Griffith University Research Ethics Manual is intended to assist researchers who are planning and conducting case study work as a component of a human research project.

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2.0 National guidelines

The *National Statement* is the Australian reference for human research ethics matters. Although the *National Statement* does not provide specific ethical advice with regards to the design, conduct and reporting of case studies Section 1 of the *National Statement* outlines the core principles that apply to all human research – including case studies.

The typically rich nature of the data collected and reported in case study work can raise significant ethical challenges with regard to confidentiality and risks.

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3.0 Human and non-human research components of a case study

The scope of work that falls within the ambit of the *National Statement* (i.e. in that it is considered human research) is incredibly broad including such things as interviews, focus groups, surveys, testing and observations. It also includes work with identified personal

information that is not already on the public record. Many case studies, to varying degrees, will include these kinds of components.

In practice this means that some elements of a case study may fall outside the scope of the University's human research ethics arrangements, but at least a proportion of the work is likely to require some level of research ethics review.

When applying for ethical clearance it may be necessary to contextualise the human research component of a project by referring to the non-human components of a case study (even though these components do not require research ethics review). Furthermore, the consent obtained from participants, and the approval of the participating bodies may need to discuss the non-human components (e.g. to confirm in writing the research use of those materials).

For more about the source of the University's human research ethics arrangements refer to Booklet 1 of the Griffith University-REM and Booklet 2 for more about research ethics review. Further information about the scope of the arrangements can be found in Booklet 17. Guidance on consent can be found in Booklet 22 and on approval by other agencies in Booklet 19.

Commentary Inset 1 - Definable group case studies

The focus of many case studies relate to individuals (e.g. the experience, approach and challenges faced by a purposively selected individual professional). Even though the publication, report or other research output might discuss a number of participants this will be done as separate individual cases.

Other case studies might relate to a group (e.g. a work team, a family, members of a small but interesting community, or a cohort of students). In this kind of situation, the case study will be looking at the aggregate experience, attitudes and behaviour of the group.

Some special ethical matters to consider for group case studies include:

1. *Is it possible/viable for some members of the group to decide not to participate or later withdraw their consent?*
2. *Could the recruitment and consent mechanisms create an implied pressure on individuals to participate (especially if 1 was answered no and/or if participation is likely to be considered by some group members as desirable/advantageous)?*
3. *Could the research activities create, or compound existing, tensions or other problems within the group and so represent a risk (such as social, economic or legal risks)?*
4. *Does the nature of the group make it more likely third parties (including colleagues, peers, friends or family) might be able to identify the group collectively or even individual group members?*

Any of the matters above that are relevant for an individual project should be considered and addressed by the design of a project, discussed in the application for research ethics review, possibly discussed in the informed consent materials and monitored throughout the conduct and reporting the results of the project.

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4.0 Identification of participants

A key ethical issue in the conduct of case study-based research is the degree to which participants (whether as individuals or a definable case group – see Commentary Inset 1) might be identifiable generally or by particular third parties (such as their peers or colleagues). Such potential identification might be direct (because the individuals or group will be named in the publication) or by inference (because there is sufficient information provided about the individuals or group to enable their identity to be extrapolated).

When a case study will include the accounts, or "stories" of participants, in their own words, this may further allow for their identification by inference, at least by their friends, family, peers or colleagues (sometimes referred to a 'internal identification – see Booklet 23 – Commentary Inset 7).

Such an identification, in of itself, does not have to be ethically problematic, but there are issues that a researcher should consider:

1. Could this identification expose participants or the case group to some form of harm (see 5.0 of this Booklet);

2. Will the potential participants be warned about the potential for them to be identified;
3. Should the potential participants be considered vulnerable; and
4. Is there any cause to be concerned about the voluntary and informed nature of the consent obtained from the potential participants (e.g. is it free of real, or potentially perceived, coercion)?

It is often the participants themselves who are best placed to reflect upon the likelihood that their participation could be identified, the risks associated with that identification, the sufficiency of the strategies to mask their identity, and whether on balance it is wise for them to participate.

In the case of the accounts, or "stories" of participants, in their own words it may be appropriate to have strategies to ensure that either respondents are sufficiently de-identified or that the risks to them have been addressed (see 7.0 of this Booklet).

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5.0 Risks

The ethical principle of beneficence requires that the risks associated with a human research project must be justified by the benefits of that project. Booklet 9 of this Manual provides guidance with regard to beneficence and discusses the different kinds of risks that can be associated with human research.

Booklet 9 also suggests strategies to address risks and the ethical principle of beneficence. Like other types of human research, case study-based research can raise significant risks – usually of the social, economic or legal kind.

These risks are often present when participants or case groups are identifiable by third parties (see 4.0 of this Booklet) and arise because of the consequence of comments, facts or circumstances being attributable to participants or the case group.

To a certain degree a researcher discharges her/his ethical responsibilities in terms of such risks if the risks are fully disclosed to potential participants who can then make a voluntary and informed decision to still participate. However, in most cases a researcher must also have a strategy to check any commentary or quotations that will be attributable (either directly or by inference). Refer to 6.0 of this Booklet for more on this issue.

The presence of risks in a planned project does not mean that it is ethically problematic; indeed often the most important and beneficial projects will involve some degree of risk. It does however necessitate reflections on matters such as: do the benefit justify the risks; and addressing the ethical principle of beneficence in the design of the project and in the application for research ethics review.

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6.0 Verifying data and protecting participants

A useful strategy to manage risks, reconfirm consent and to foster an ongoing positive relationship with participants, is to show them the relevant text, quotes and description that will be used in a publication, report or other research output. This can be especially important if a case study is intended to be an account or "story" of the of participants in their own words.

Depending upon the presence of risks and/or the vulnerability of participants such consultation might be crucial if the participants/the case group could be identifiable by third parties (whether directly, or by inference – see 4.0 of this Booklet). The text (e.g. account, extract or quote) that is to be included in the publication, report of other research output would ordinarily be all that is confirmed with the participant.

Only the participant's own text should be shared with them, unless the consent obtained from participants approves for review by other participants. Such consultation should be for the purposes of confirming the degree to which the extract has been made sufficiently anonymous (if appropriate) and/or so that the individual can reflect upon any risks associated with the extract. **The researcher(s) must decide prior to the commencement of the research project whether participants should otherwise be able to edit the extract (e.g. for accuracy or to clarify what they said).**

This mechanism, how it will operate, the reasons for its existence, and any limitations on the changes a participant can make should be anticipated in the consent materials (see 7.0 of this Booklet) and discussed in the application for research ethics review.

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7.0 Consent

Booklet 22 of this Manual provides guidance on the formulation of appropriate consent mechanisms. The required features of a consent mechanism are described at 7.0 of Booklet 22.

This Booklet at 3.0, 4.0, 5.0 and 6.0 provides advice that would inform the special information and assurances that should be included in a consent mechanism for a case study-based project. Experience suggests that providing such information not only facilitates participants providing full consent, but it can actually increase the likelihood that individuals will consent to participate in the project. See Commentary 1 sidebar for a discussion about case study groups, rather than individuals.

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Contacts

There are a number of resources available to assist researchers formulate an appropriate response to a question or challenge about the design and/or conduct of a project. This includes the Griffith University Research Ethics Manual and the Human Research Ethics Information Sheet Series. These documents are available from the URL below.

Research students – The first point of contact for research students for advice on any research ethics matter is always your supervisors.

REAs – All academic elements of the University have been asked to appoint at least one member of academic staff as a Research Ethics Advisor. REAs are a local contact for advice, information and suggestions. The contact details of all the current REAs can be found on the URL below.

Office for Research – Staff in the Office for Research (see below) are available to advise with the process of lodging an application or other administrative matters, procedural or policy questions. However, you will be asked what advice you have sought or received already (e.g. consultation with the REA for your area).

Manager, Research Ethics and Integrity

Tel: (07) 373 54375
research-ethics@griffith.edu.au

Policy Officer, Research Ethics and Integrity

Tel: (07) 373 58043

Research Ethics Systems and Support Officer

Tel: (07) 373 5 2069

On the ethics web site you will find:

https://www.griffith.edu.au/research/research-services/research-ethics-integrity/human

- The other booklets of the *Griffith University Research Ethics Manual*
- The *Griffith University Human Research Ethics Information Sheet Series*
- Either downloadable copies of, or links to, the various application forms
- Contact information for the Research Ethics Advisers (REA) and other contacts
- Educational and other resource material
- Useful external links

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