

MEMO: Research Ethics Committee (Human)

Ethical guidelines regarding online data collection

As a result of the social-distancing measures during the Covid-19 crisis, many researchers are considering implementation of online methods of data collection. This includes the use of video-calling (e.g. Skype/Zoom) to virtually replicate the face-to-face interviews or focus groups. However, there are certain ethical aspects that need to be taken into account for this type of research design.

Researchers are advised to follow the **qualitative research good practice guidelines for research** (DoH, 2015; Seidman, 2019), when making use of interviewing, via email, telephone, and Zoom, Skype etc. The DoH 2015 document is downloadable from the Human Ethics website: [https://rcd.mandela.ac.za/Research-Ethics/Research-Ethics-Committee-Human-\(REC-H\)](https://rcd.mandela.ac.za/Research-Ethics/Research-Ethics-Committee-Human-(REC-H))

Informed consent when using technology/ online methods to interview cannot be waived.

As researchers will not meet face-to-face with participants, they need to:

- provide participants with the consent document/ information ahead of time
- review the consent information orally (i.e. if signed consent is not practical) with the participants before starting the first interview
- ask participants specifically whether they have any questions about the study and answer them
- confirm that participants give permission to record the interviews
- remind participants throughout the study, at the start of each subsequent interview, about the consent information, provide them with opportunities to ask questions, and reaffirm their willingness to continue in the study

Recording of the online interview is a requirement to ensure that the interview can be transcribed in full.

Researchers will need to assess issues of confidentiality and privacy as some participants may have concerns about limited privacy in crowded family homes and this could compromise confidentiality/privacy of information.

Researchers are encouraged to consider possible technical glitches/ difficulties that can occur and their responses (Archibald *et al.* 2019)

- Typical issues associated with using Skype reported in previous studies include dropped calls and pauses, poor audio or video quality, and the inability to read nonverbal cues as a result of inconsistent and delayed connectivity. Critically, Skype does not currently offer the ability to record sessions securely and instead requires use of third-party providers.
- Technical difficulties when using Zoom were low Internet bandwidth, outdated hardware, or limited webcam and/or microphone functionality resulting in dropped calls, lost call connection. However, a key advantage of Zoom is its ability to securely record and store sessions without recourse to third-party software. This feature is particularly important in research where the protection of highly sensitive data is required. Other important security features include user-specific authentication, real-time encryption of meetings, and the ability to backup recordings to online remote server networks or local drives.

If researchers need to change their Methodology to the new online interview/ data collection as a direct result of COVID-19 considerations, they will have to submit a formal amendment request to the RECH. This process will be expedited.

The amendment request should contain the following:

- Copy of Ethics approval letter
- Copy of Original approved RECH application form
- Amendment request form (RECH-006. Amendment)

All documentation for the amendment request should be forwarded to Mr Imtiaz Khan Imtiaz.Khan@mandela.ac.za at the Office of Research Development.

Submission dates for amendment requests: 18 May 2020 and 1 June 2020

References

1. Archibald, MM, RC Ambagtsheer, MG Casey, M Lawless (2019) Using Zoom Videoconferencing for Qualitative Data Collection: Perceptions and Experiences of Researchers and Participants. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. Volume 18: 1–8.
2. Jowett, A. (2020) Carrying out qualitative research under lockdown – Practical and ethical considerations. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/04/20/carrying-out-qualitative-research-under-lockdown-practical-and-ethical-considerations/>
3. Seidman, I. (2019) *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* 5th Edition.

Please note that relevant reference material will appear on the Nelson Mandela University webpage. Researchers are advised to check regularly for new updates.

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