

Insider Research!

What is insider research – in the context of ethical approval?

The ethics committee of the IASR (IASREC) views insider research as any research undertaken with research 'subjects' with whom the researcher(s) has a pre-existing or ongoing professional or personal relationship.

- This means if you own, manage or work for the service that potential research subjects use and this service is your means of access to those research subjects – be they service users or colleagues you would be conducting 'insider' research.
- It also includes utilising friends and family members or, in some cases, students.

The word 'subjects' is used advisedly here since subjects in this context may potentially be active participants in the research process or the owners of recorded information about them as individuals.

The fact that the researcher can access people, or information about people, for the purpose of research, does not mean that they should do so – at least not without due consideration of the ethical implications. That said, it is appreciated that much important service evaluation and service improvement can only result from meaningful consultation with service users and individuals working within organisations are often best placed to know what questions really need to be addressed.

Points to consider and address in your application to the Ethics Committee

The really important factors to consider and the possible pitfalls are:

- The freedom to consent, or withhold consent, from the perspective of the service user. For example:
 - Does your design and methodology really leave people free to decide whether or not they wish to take part?
 - If your design means that you will know who has and who has not agreed to participate, how can you adequately reassure people that refusal to participate will not adversely affect the service they receive?
 - Are you providing sufficient information about the reason for your study, how the findings will be used and how people's identities will be protected – especially within the service?
- What impact will pre-existing or perceived power dynamics in your relationship with the service user have on the research process and your findings? For example:
 - If you were a police officer wanting to investigate the extent of petty crime in a population of adolescents who have experienced arrest what sort of response do you think you might get if you asked them in a face to face interview? – How valid would your findings be likely to be?
 - If you ran a family centre and asked people about the quality of support they have received, how free might they feel to answer truthfully if they thought you knew who they were?
- What would happen if you were made aware of information that as a researcher you would keep confidential, but to do so would compromise your 'professional' role?

- In your report you may be able to offer anonymity to individuals in relation to readers outside of your institution, but will you be able mask identities for an internal audience?
- Prior knowledge about the context in which the research is being undertaken and the participants can have advantages but might also limit the researcher's ability to be truly objective.

As with all ethical considerations there is an issue of degree of risk related to the sensitivity of the research topic. Engaging friends and family in responding to questions about voting intentions for example, would be expected to be relatively benign whereas asking in an interview about experiences of illness or personal relationships or illicit drug use might well place both the participants and the researcher in a difficult position. Regardless of how well the researcher anonymises identities in the report, the researcher retains the knowledge about individuals' views and experiences.

Insider research is not prohibited but alternatives, such as accessing participants who are not known to the researcher or their employing service, would be preferred in most cases.

If there is no such alternative then the choice of data collection method is important.

- Setting up a method whereby responses can be anonymised (and remain anonymous) to the insider researcher is the preferred approach wherever possible. This can be achieved by using anonymised self completion questionnaires (with an anonymous method of return)
- Or, if face to face interview is felt to be important, consider whether there is a way in which this might be undertaken by a colleague who has no professional or pre-existing role with the participant.

If none of the preceding options are viable then the researcher needs to address, in detail, all of the issues raised here in terms of the level of risk to both participant and researcher and what steps will be taken to alleviate or minimise them.

The ethics committee is obliged to balance the interests of the service recipient, or research subject, against the potential gain in knowledge. Where the proposed researcher has a pre-existing or ongoing relationship with potential participants the methods to be employed will be scrutinised, and in the majority of cases it is likely that the ethics committee will require that the design of the research project will fully protect the anonymity of participants unless there are powerful arguments to the contrary. The ethics committee would also expect to see that the research design has done everything possible to address power dynamics in research of this kind

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