

5- Observations

1. **Ethics Approval Required:** Observing people, whether in public spaces in Australia or overseas, requires ethics approval. This applies regardless of whether it's a public or more controlled environment.
2. **Waiver of Consent:** For public observations where individuals cannot reasonably be contacted for consent, applying for a waiver of consent is common practice. This involves demonstrating to the ethics committee that it's impractical to obtain individual consent.
3. **Committee Considerations:** The ethics committee needs to understand the specifics of your observation study, including the locations and the nature of the observations. This is crucial because different settings can have varying ethical implications, such as observing behaviours at railway intersections versus public dining areas.
4. **Safety and Ethical Considerations:** Certain observation settings, like railway intersections, might pose safety risks or witness traumatic events. Ethical protocols should include provisions for minimizing harm to participants and researchers alike.
5. **Public vs. Controlled Environments:** Even in public spaces, ethical considerations are necessary. Projects involving public observations may sometimes require informational flyers or other means to inform the public about the study, depending on the nature of the observation and the potential impact on participants.

Clarifying Questions:

- Could you provide more examples or guidelines on how to address safety concerns and minimize harm during observational research in potentially sensitive public environments?
- How does Monash University typically handle applications for observational studies that involve international settings, considering cultural differences and local regulations?

These questions aim to further understand the ethical protocols and practical considerations required when conducting observational research, especially in diverse and potentially challenging environments.

Full Transcript

So, observing people—I've heard about phone calls. I've been observing people for the last two years and have collected data in Australia and overseas. I was told that I don't need ethics approval. Yes, you do need ethics approval to observe, and most likely, a waiver of consent. Depending on the project, the committee may ask for flyers to be posted in the area. If it's a wide-open public space, there are ways to deal with it.

Yes, the point from this scenario is that observations in public need ethics approval as well. If you're observing people, their behaviour, and what they're doing in different spaces, you need ethics approval. The committee will want to know what you're doing because there are different ramifications.

For example, we've had projects where they wanted to sit at railway intersections and observe people's behaviour, which carries the possibility of witnessing accidents, as opposed to watching people eat their lunch at McDonald's.