Ethical Guidelines for Art and Research Projects

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art + research

Abstract

In each art and research project, specific ethical considerations will arise. This document is intended to act as a guide, as well as to flag certain aspects of your project that may need special care. It is important to pay attention to and anticipate the tensions specific to your project, as well as the relationships and dynamics within it.

While considering the questions raised in the table below, it is important to discuss how each point will get addressed and *who is responsible for what*. In other words, defining roles and responsibilities is not just a logistical concern, it is an ethical one.

These guidelines are about projects that involve community members who are engaged in or doing research and art, including as audiences. Ethical issues relevant to working relationships between artists and researchers are addressed in the [Art and Research Partnership Agreement Template.](#)

Administrative Details

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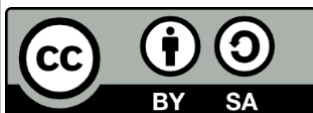
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There is a need for a thoughtful consideration of the consequences of our decisions in every phase of research. For some folks, when we talk about ethics, it may bring to mind the process of submitting an application to a research ethics board. There is a difference between research ethics applications and ethical research methodologies, however, and obtaining research ethics approval doesn't automatically equate to engaging in ethical research practices (Zeffiro, 2019).

This resource is intended to act as a guide for ethical research practices - specifically about *ethics when it comes to engaging with arts*. There are lots of other resources regarding ethical considerations for partnerships and working with community.

Another thing to keep in mind while reviewing this resource is regarding the language that we use when writing about who is involved in an art and research project. This resource is intended for projects that involve community members (including audiences) who are engaged in or doing research and art. We recognize that some projects are more community-based than others, and sometimes, the word participant (or advocate, or another word that makes sense) is a better fit for a project than community member. Another example about language is that it felt important to include the phrase "my story" in this document because that phrase feels very different than the phrase "a participant's story". We've made choices about language throughout this document, and it points to the importance of considering this as you develop your own projects.

Overarching/Underlying Considerations
In addition to what is outlined throughout this document, there are overarching and underlying considerations that will be helpful when thinking about ethics at the intersection of art and research:

- Ethical tensions occur and are understood differently based on your perspective or context.
- Ethical tensions are project-specific. Identifying and working through ethical issues needs to happen (sometimes multiple times during a project) within the unique context of each project
- Although it is important to consider ethical tensions before a project begins, ethics are not unchanging and best (or least-worst) ethical paths cannot be predetermined. Ethics are contextual and relational and need to be taken up throughout the duration of any given project.

Ethical terrain

As a big-picture, project-starting approach, you may want to consider the activities in your project as a way to map out the ethical terrain that you will need to navigate. Nichols and colleagues (2022), for example, lay out major activities in Research Based Theatre: designing, researching, producing, rehearsing, performing, witnessing, documenting and evaluating. Each of these activities prompts and calls for different questions to be considered and actions to be taken in order to respect, honour, and care for the people involved in the project.

Ethical Consideration	Questions to Consider	Project-Based Examples and Approaches
1. Considerations of **authorship and ownership.** Art and research projects often involve sharing art, and art often reflects personal stories. This can raise questions about how and where the story/ art travels, and who has control of this. (See also,C[4]'s Art and Research Partnership Agreement Template and Art and Research Data Management Plan Template)	In the case where art is the telling of one's own story: ❖ What is it like, or what happens, when my art is shared or made public? ❖ How do we navigate feelings and experiences that come with the experience of art/story/work being public? ❖ How is 'my art/story/work' used? ❖ Where is the art displayed? Is it somewhere that the research team, including participants, feel comfortable, accepted, and welcome? Is that important? ❖ What happens if we can't check back in with participants regarding the use of their story/their art?	It may happen that artwork is published or shared somewhere, and the creator of that art no longer has control over where it goes. As partners and collaborators, you may want to create written agreements about authorship and ownership that reflect the needs and expectations of all involved, making sure that these agreements are flexible and adaptable. Consent should be an ongoing and active part of the project for the whole research team (artists, participants, researchers, etc). It is also important to note that there are particular contexts in which attention to who has control of where the story/art travels needs to be paid differently, such as when projects involve people who are houseless, people who move often, people who are in altered states, or people who have died. *Example*: a community-based social worker was running an arts program in which folks who were underhoused were

		creating visual art. In considering the creation of an art exhibit with the art created by folks in the program, one of the ethical concerns was regarding consent. There was art made by someone who no longer came to the program and who the facilitator had no way of finding or contacting. Another piece of art had been made by a participant who was no longer alive. The social worker was considering what this meant for the inclusion of these pieces of art in the project.
2. Creating, witnessing, engaging with art can bring up **difficult emotions, feelings, experiences, trauma**. Art often explores emotionally charged topics in ways that people may not be used to and may also involve embodied and/or sensorial experiences. As engagement with and creation of art can involve different ways of knowing and understanding, it may involve disrupting perceptions and strongly held or potentially unknown, beliefs.	In thinking through the possibility of difficult emotions, feelings, experiences, and trauma: ❖ Will we be directly or indirectly addressing potentially sensitive topics? ❖ Might some of the people involved be especially affected by the topics we are (directly or indirectly) addressing? ❖ Even if we aren't directly addressing what we perceive to be potentially sensitive topics, are there different ways that these topics can be interpreted and understood or experienced?	It may be wise to lay the groundwork for what works for people or what feels supportive before the art-making begins. This might include a direct conversation about what "support" might feel like for you and for the group when difficult things come up. If possible, consider whether questions about support can be woven into, or part of, the artistic practice/process. You can also provide tangible supports such as: a trusted support-person who has experience in providing support about the topics addressed in your project; phone numbers to call when in crisis or when dealing with difficult emotions; 'safe words/actions' that can

		be used easily if someone needs to stop what's happening in the project and process their experience/the information differently.
		You can decide what support looks like and include it in written agreements.
		As an arts facilitator or artist who is sharing their practice, it could be important to navigate between reminding, encouraging, and/or telling participants and audiences to take care of themselves, and asking directly, "how can I help you to take care of yourself?"
3. Considerations of audience/public. Some of your work might involve audiences or sharing with the public/in public spaces.	When engaging in a project that involves an audience/public display: ❖ What is our responsibility to the audience?	Attention to the experience of the audience may need to be paid. Nichols et al.(2022, p.5) ask "How will we provide audience care: pre-performance, during, and post-performance"?
4. Considerations of time-related **participant consent.**	To consider ongoing, time-related, and relational participant consent: ❖ How do we understand consent in projects that evolve over time? Or projects that are created within a period of large change?	Consent by participants may be needed at different stages of the work.

| 5. Considerations of **participant anonymity, privacy, and the right of acknowledgement.**

Some participants who are engaged in an art and research project might appreciate privacy or require anonymity, while some might want their identities to be known. Those who want anonymity might require it as a means of protection. Those who want their identities known might want their art, insights, contributions, and stories attributable to them.
(See also,C[4]'s Art and Research Data Management Plan Template). | Thinking through the need or desire for anonymity or privacy and wanting to have 'my name on my story':

❖ How can we discuss anonymity and privacy? Can this conversation be made ongoing, or can it be revisited at certain points throughout the project?

❖ What would it look like to honour the work/stories/art of those who require or want anonymity? I.e.can we shape the art in ways that include the voice of participants who require anonymity?

❖ For those who want their identities to be known, what is the best way for us to ensure the public/audience knows whose work/art/story this is?

❖ How can we avoid assumptions about who *needs* anonymity?

Sometimes academic researchers or ethics boards (or other folks too!) understand participants as vulnerable and therefore requiring anonymity- It is important to question these assumptions | Anonymity and/or privacy and acknowledgement need not be mutually exclusive.

Example of participant experience regarding anonymity and acknowledgement:

"During the workshop process some of the youth were very protective of their identities and therefore very appreciative of TSDC policies around confidentiality. However, when it came to the performance, many expressed a desire to be able to share photos from the play on social media. Others wanted their names to be included in information associated with the play…" (Vosters et al., p.200)

Examples of techniques or methods regarding anonymity, privacy and acknowledgement:

Sinding et al. (2008) discuss avoiding the risk of being identified by:
❖ Creating composite characters,
❖ Organizing representations by theme, situation, or plot rather than individuals' specific stories. |

	and find out where anonymity is necessary and/or wanted. ❖ How do wider social systems such as colonialism and oppression, create and/or shape our ethical considerations?	It's also possible to create art where this dilemma does not arise. Transforming Stories, Driving Change (TSDC) was a performance-based research project about social exclusion and community response. In the TSDC project, everyone was named in the play, personal stories were told, but everyone's privacy was upheld because of how the play was devised. (See Vosters et al. for details on this project). "...questions about the ethics of knowing how to make personal stories public in a way that honours the performer-advocates' stories and their desires for a public voice while preserving their privacy" (Vosters et al., p.77).
6. Considerations of representation. Aspects of people's lived experiences and identities are sometimes dramatized or depicted in art.	In thinking through what might happen when aspects of participants' lives or identities are depicted or described through art: ❖ Is there space to challenge the interpretations? How to create/ensure this space? 'Space' could include: trustful relationships, transparency,	Being explicit about these opportunities, such as inviting feedback/anonymous feedback. Being explicit about what is needed to create transparency and trustful relationships.

	physical space and/or time set aside to do this.	
7. Considerations of **aesthetics.** Aspects of art that are about the overall sensory appeal.	Thinking about the relationship between the aesthetic goals of the art, the goals of art in the context of the research design and the research goals of the project. ❖ What does it look like to pay attention to research considerations and aesthetic elements at the same time? ❖ How do we honour or maintain the integrity and/or life and/or sensory aspects, of the art practice? ❖ Do we need to/is it best to make an aesthetic decision or a research decision in this moment or are we able to do both at the same time? ❖ If the goal is to communicate a message – how do we maintain/can we leverage both research integrity and artistic strength in order to communicate the message? (Boydell et al., 2016).	A discussion and /or written agreements about aesthetics could involve defining artistic goals, defining aesthetic guidelines, defining research goals, and thinking through the integration of these things. It may benefit the project to integrate aesthetic and research considerations in each step of the project i.e. defining project goals, designing the project etc. (See also,C[4]'s Art and Research Partnership Agreement Template and Art and Resarch Data Management Plan Template). This integration could be helpful in navigating decision making in the context of research considerations and aesthetic elements i.e. finding ways to combine these two things so that one does not hold more power in decision making, or so that how these decisions are made is transparent and agreed upon. Considerations of aesthetic might also include honouring or maintaining the integrity, life, and/or sensory aspects of

| | | the art practice without compromising it because of the research design/goals/questions and vice versa.

Example of the balance needed in the relationship between aesthetics and research:

Considering how to make an aesthetic decision about which research data (data could be stories, transcripts, recordings…) *work* in the context of the art medium that you are using (Boydell et al., 2016). |
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Further Reading Regarding Ethics and Art

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