Use of Photography, Audio, and Video in Research

Purpose and Scope

Photography, audio recording, and video recording can be valuable methods of collecting research data, but their use requires careful consideration of participant privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent. Because images and recordings may contain identifiable information, researchers should consider how these methods affect participant risk and the safeguards needed to protect participants. This guidance outlines the ethical considerations associated with collecting, storing, using, and disseminating images and recordings. Researchers should address the relevant considerations in their IRB proposals and consent materials, including the purpose of recording, the potential for identification, and the measures used to protect participants.

Considerations by Recording Method

Photography

Photographs taken at public events or of public spaces **may** be permissible without participant consent, as long as individuals are not specifically identified or targeted. However, if photographs are taken of identifiable individuals as part of a research study—particularly if linked to interview responses or other data—the risk of identification increases. In such cases:

- The protocol must explain what will be photographed and why.
- Researchers must describe the level of identifiability and how photographs will be stored, coded, or de-identified.
- Consent procedures must reflect the use of photography and offer participants the option to decline.

If photographs will be used for purposes beyond the study, such as presentations or public dissemination, an **IRB Audio, Video, and Photo Release Form** is required.

Audio Recording

Audio recording is common in individual interviews and some focus groups, but it raises specific considerations:

- Studies that involve audio recording of participants are collecting identifiable data.
- Consent must clearly explain that audio recording will be used, why it is necessary, and how recordings will be stored and protected.

- If a participant chooses to withdraw, the protocol should state whether the recording will be deleted or retained in part.

For focus groups:

- Audio recording can be more complex due to the presence of multiple participants.
- Researchers must have a plan for how an individual can withdraw from the recording, even if their contributions were already captured.
- The IRB may request a justification for audio recording instead of using detailed field notes.

Protocols must include:

- A plan for how audio files will be coded or de-identified;
- Who will have access to recordings;
- How files will be securely stored and protected;
- When and how recordings will be deleted or archived.

Video Recording

Video recording introduces the highest level of identifiability because it combines visual and audio data. As a result, additional safeguards are required:

- Researchers must justify why video recording is necessary instead of using audio or written notes.
- The protocol must describe what will be recorded, how video files will be stored, and how identities will be protected.
- The consent form must clearly state that the participant will be recorded on video and explain the intended use of the footage and who will have access to the video.

In educational settings (such as classroom *research*):

- Researchers must provide a way for students or others who do not wish to be recorded to opt out.
- This may involve seating arrangements, stickers or identifiers, or post-processing of video (such as blurring).
- The protocol must explain these procedures and how non-participants will be protected.

As with photography, public event video **may** be acceptable if individuals are not targeted and recording is permitted by the setting.

Retention, Reuse, and Dissemination

For the purposes of this guidance, dissemination includes academic publications, theses and dissertations, conference presentations, teaching materials, professional training, online media, and public or restricted-access repositories. Partial masking or visual alteration does not necessarily render an image or recording non-identifiable if a participant could still reasonably be recognized.

If voice, image, or video recordings will be retained beyond the project (for example, in a teaching archive, exhibit, or public registry), researchers must:

- Inform participants in the consent materials that recordings will not be destroyed at the end of the study;
- Explain the nature and purpose of long-term use;
- Include a separate **IRB Audio, Video, and Photo Release Form** if appropriate;
- Make clear whether participation is contingent on agreement to archival use or whether participants may participate without releasing their media.

Preparing Your IRB Proposal

If you plan to use photography, audio, or video in your study:

- Justify the need for the method in your protocol;
- Clearly explain in the consent process how recordings will be used, stored, and protected;
- Describe how participants can opt out of recording or request deletion of their data;
- Use coding and secure storage to protect identities whenever possible;
- If recordings will be used for teaching, archiving, or public display, obtain appropriate additional permissions (**IRB Audio, Video, and Photo Release Form)**.

Additional Considerations for Research Involving Children

Parental Permission and Child Assent

Research involving minors that includes photography, audio recording, or video recording requires parental permission and, when appropriate, child assent (accounting for age, maturity, and capacity). Because recordings of minors often capture identifiable information, additional safeguards are required, particularly when recordings may be used beyond the research team.

Parental permission allows recordings to be collected and used for research purposes as described in the approved protocol and consent materials. However, parental permission does not constitute indefinite authorization for identifiable public or educational use of recordings after a participant reaches the age of majority.

Requirements related to re-consent at the age of majority apply only when identifiable recordings will be disseminated beyond the research team.

Identifiability and De-identification

For the purposes of this guidance, a recording or image is considered **identifiable** if a participant could reasonably be recognized by themselves, family members, peers, or others familiar with the setting, even if portions of the image or recording have been obscured.

Techniques such as:

- Placing a bar over the eyes
- Blurring or pixelating portions of the face
- Cropping images while leaving distinguishing features visible
- Masking names while leaving voices or distinctive contextual information

do not, by themselves, constitute de-identification if the individual could still reasonably be recognized.

A recording is considered **de-identified** only when:

- The participant cannot reasonably be recognized by appearance, voice, or contextual information; and
- The material does not include distinctive features, settings, or narrative details that would allow identification by someone familiar with the participant.

If identifiable recordings of minors will be disseminated, the requirements regarding re-consent at the age of majority apply to identifiable individuals, regardless of partial masking or visual modification.

Information to Include in the IRB Protocol

Protocols involving recording of minors must include:

- A description of what will be recorded and why recording is necessary;
- A description of how recordings will be stored, secured, and who will have access;
- A description of the parental permission and child assent process;
- A statement indicating whether recordings will be used only for research analysis or may also be used for teaching, presentations, or publication.

Retention and Research Use

Identifiable recordings of minors may be retained indefinitely for:

- Data analysis;
- Audit or verification of research findings;
- Secondary research consistent with the original consent and IRB approval.

Retention for these purposes does not require re-consent at the age of majority, provided recordings are not used for dissemination beyond the research team.

If you are unsure whether your planned use counts as dissemination, assume that it does and describe it in the protocol.

Dissemination of Recordings Involving Children

Dissemination includes academic publications, theses and dissertations, conference presentations, teaching materials, professional training, online media, and public or restricted-access repositories. Identifiable recordings of minors obtained for research purposes may not be used indefinitely in teaching materials, conference presentations, or other forms of dissemination unless one of the following conditions is met:

- The participant provides consent for continued use after reaching the age of majority;
- The recording has been de-identified such that individuals are not recognizable;
- The image or recording was previously published or formally disseminated as part of the scholarly record.

Researchers who intend to use identifiable recordings in dissemination must describe in the protocol:

- Whether recordings will be used beyond the research team;
- How long such use will continue;
- Whether and how re-consent will be sought, or when use will cease.

If researchers choose to limit use rather than seek re-consent, the protocol must explain how they will determine when dissemination must stop (for example, by tracking participant age or by establishing a defined end date for use).

Previously Published Materials

This requirement applies to future or continued dissemination of identifiable recordings. It does not require withdrawal of materials that were lawfully published or disseminated prior to the participant reaching the age of majority. However, researchers should address foreseeable plans for continued use of such materials when participants reach the age of majority.

Derived Images and Clips

Still images, excerpts, or clips derived from identifiable recordings are considered recordings for the purposes of these requirements and are subject to the same consent and dissemination requirements.

Preparing Your IRB Proposal

If your study involves recording minors:

- Obtain parental permission and child assent;
- Clearly state whether recordings are for research use only or may be disseminated;
- Describe storage, access, and retention procedures;
- If dissemination is planned, explain how long recordings will be used and how continued use after the age of majority will be addressed;
- Do not assume parental permission allows indefinite public or educational use of identifiable recordings.

Recording Children in Research: Quick Decision Guide for Investigators

This guide applies only when minors are recorded as part of *research* activities.
If your study involves photography, audio, or video recording of minors, use the questions below to determine what must be addressed in your protocol and consent materials.

Step 1: Will minors be identifiable in recordings?

- ☐ No → Describe recording procedures and data security. No additional dissemination requirements apply.
- ☐ Yes → Continue to Step 2.

Step 2: How will recordings be used?

☐ **Research use only (analysis, coding, or archival recordkeeping)**

If recordings will only be viewed by the research team:
You must:

- Obtain parental permission and child assent.
- Describe storage, access, and security of recordings.

You do NOT need to:

- Track participants after they reach the age of majority.
- Obtain re-consent solely for retention of recordings used internally.

☐ **Teaching, conference presentations, or professional training**

If identifiable recordings may be shown outside the research team:
You must:

- Clearly state this in consent materials.
- Describe how long recordings will be used.
- Explain whether re-consent will be sought at the age of majority or when use will stop.

Identifiable recordings may not be used indefinitely in presentations or teaching without re-consent, de-identification, or prior publication.

☐ **Publication or public dissemination (including online media, open repositories, or documentaries)**

You must:

- Clearly explain the intended public use in consent materials.
- Describe whether recordings will remain publicly accessible.
- Explain how continued use after the age of majority will be handled (re-consent, de-identification, or discontinuation of use).

Step 3: Will identifiable recordings be retained long-term?

- ☐ Yes → Describe storage, security, and access controls. Retention for research purposes is permitted, but dissemination rules still apply.
- ☐ No → Describe when and how recordings will be destroyed.

Document Attributes

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