

Confidentiality vs. Anonymity

Confidentiality

Confidentiality means that the information is private, secret, not universally available, or known to only a select few. According to the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (2014), confidentiality is the “obligation of an individual or organization to safeguard entrusted information ... [and] includes obligations to protect information from unauthorized access, use, disclosure, modification, loss or theft” (TCPS 2, 2014, p.58). To learn more, see Chapter 5 of the TCPS 2 (2014) at http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2-2014/TCPS_2_FINAL_Web.pdf.

Anonymity

Anonymity means that information is not identifiable by name to a specific participant, even to the researcher. The TCPS defines anonymous information as that which “never had identifiers associated with it” (TCPS 2, 2014, p.59).

Considerations

Researchers have a responsibility to safeguard information entrusted to them and not to misuse or wrongfully disclose it (TCPS 2, 2014). Researchers should consider the following when making decisions about data access and storage.

- 1) Contact data of participants
- 2) Access to raw data (including audio or video files)
 - a. How will data be stored? How long will it be stored? Will it be public? What security measures have been put into place to safeguard the information?
 - b. How will the data be destroyed or archived?
 - c. Note: There is a five year minimum for data storage
- 3) How will the participant's privacy be respected (for data storage and report write-up)?
- 4) Write-up of the results:
 - a. qualitative (e.g., with names, quotes) vs. quantitative (aggregated data)
 - b. use of pseudonyms vs. real names
 - c. participant review of data before publication
- 5) Size of sample – small samples may be more identifiable even with anonymized information
- 6) Possible identification of participants due to uniqueness or recognizability (are there precautions to alleviate this?)



- 7) Is the researcher under any obligation to report on specific findings (e.g., child abuse, risk of suicide, safety, etc.)?
- 8) For group settings, how will the researcher manage confidentiality for the participants? How will confidentiality guidelines be described to the participants?
- 9) If anonymity is optional, include a provision in the consent form to have the participant allow the use of his/her name.