



# D1.3 Methodological participation guide

**Ethical guidance for participatory action  
research in BioTraCes**

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## Summary

### Summary of Deliverable

The Methodological Participation Guide is a document providing guidance for participatory action research in BioTraCes. It is based on experiences and needs of the consortium partners and it comprises an outline of research ethics frameworks that can guide and monitor the ethics of participatory research on the ground. The document highlights ethical challenges and opportunities that can be offered by different types of methods, which draw on the experience of the consortium partner and reflect the BioTraCes PEPE framework. The document also contains a discussion of main differences between institutional ethics procedures and situations that may arise while conducting participatory action research in practice. To address some of these situations, it presents two alternative ethical frameworks that can provide guiding principles for research involved in the BioTraCes cases.

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# 1 Introduction

This document contains ethical guidance for participatory action research in the BioTraCes project. It represents one of the deliverables of the first work package and it is aimed at supporting ethical and inclusive research throughout the project. The document combines experiences and ethical concerns of the BioTraCes consortium partners regarding their cases with an outline of research ethics frameworks that can guide and monitor the ethics of participatory research on the ground. This draws on an ethics workshop organised at the outset of the project, which explored potential ethical dilemmas that might arise when conducting participatory action research on the ground, in specific cases. Moreover, the document discusses differences between institutional ethical procedures and ethics in practice and concludes with highlighting two main approaches, which are considered to provide productive frameworks for conducting ethical and inclusive research in the BioTraCes cases.

## 2 Ethics in BioTraCes and the workshop set-up

The BioTraCes project aims at coproducing knowledge on biodiversity challenges and potentials for transformative change by using a participatory action research framework. As such, the focus of ethical guidance contained in this document is placed on ethical dilemmas that might arise in practice, while conducting the research. The project comprises nine cases located in different European contexts (e.g., geographic, cultural, institutional, political) and involving different kinds of participants, such as elderly women, children, and groups from cultural minority backgrounds. Therefore, while each project team will require ethical approval from their respective institutions, participatory action research can give rise to different ethical issues on the ground.

Differences between institutional ethics procedures and approvals, and ethics-in-practice, have already been raised by participatory action research scholars (Abma, 2020, Bussu et al, 2021). In this spirit, to develop ethical guidance, we conducted a workshop to discuss and reflect on potential ethical dilemmas that the consortium partners identified in connection to their cases. The workshop took place during the first Consortium Meeting held in February 2023. It was co-organised and facilitated by Corelia Baibarac-Duignan, Tamalone van den Eijnden, and Esther Turnhout from University of Twente.

The aim of the workshop was to discuss the various cases and the methodological approaches that the consortium partners had experience with and considered useful for the overall project. In connection with this, we jointly identified ethical points of attention for the methods that could be used and/or further developed to conduct participatory action research in the BIOTraCes project.

We started from a mapping of previous experiences with participatory and other research methods. For this purpose, we asked everybody to add in advance of the workshop their methodological experiences on a digital canvas (Mural.co) including reflections on the kinds of interactions these methods entailed, as well as their perceived strengths and limitations. We used this as the basis for a collaborative reflection on the methodological experiences and ambitions we collectively bring to BIOTraCes. For this reflection, we asked the following guiding question: *What methods do you find interesting for a participatory research approach that we could employ in the BIOTraCes project?*

After this reflection, we discussed the methods in relation to the different terms of the PEPE Framework, an initial conceptual framework that guides the project and that will be substantiated with the research results during the project. The PEPE framework comprises the transformative principles of Pluralising, Empowering, Politicising, and Embedding, which can be employed as theoretical constructs, (ethical) principles, and approaches. In this workshop, we put the emphasis on how particular participatory methods are relevant for these principles, what challenges might emerge in relation to these principles, and what would be possible ways of dealing with these challenges.

To make these principles more concrete in relation to ethical considerations, during the group discussions, we handed cards with specific themes to every team, to support critical reflection about specific challenges. These cards included the following themes:

- 1) Power dynamics
- 2) Data (collection, ownership, interpretation)
- 3) Dealing with disagreement and conflict
- 4) Balancing multiple roles

- 5) Dealing with different timelines
- 6) Motivations and Interests

Each group was asked to focus on one of the four PEPE principles and discuss three methods that may be relevant for BIOTraCes. For each method, the group was asked to discuss the relevance, challenges, and potential solutions to prevent these challenges. This resulted in four flipcharts that were presented in plenary.

### 3 Main Ethical Challenges for BioTraCes

The results of the workshop have been used to identify important points of attention and main ethical dilemmas that may arise within the Biotraces project in relation to the four Biotraces principles of Pluralising, Empowering, Politicising and Embedding (PEPE). These four principles were often connected in the discussions. The ethical challenges that were mentioned mirrored each other or overlapped, and similar methods were discussed as relevant for different principles. We also noted that ethical challenges were not explicitly tied to methods. While the discussion of methods was useful to bring them out, often it included more general reflections on participatory research. Finally, ethics were discussed not just in relation to research but also in relation to societal processes and transformations themselves.

#### 3.1 Pluralising:

Useful methods for pluralising can be employed to identify diverse perspectives, values and knowledge systems and bring them together in participatory and collaborative processes. They can include stakeholder analysis, values and knowledge assessment, individual open-ended interviews, inside or during outside walks, analysis of problem frames or problem trees, and creative futuring methods.

Challenges:

It is important to make sure you have the full diversity of perspectives. You need to do research and put effort into finding excluded and marginalized perspectives and develop appropriate ways / methods to include these perspectives. Such inclusion requires a safe space and relations of trust. To ensure this, it is important to carefully assess what the risks are for stakeholders to disclose their values, perspectives, and knowledge. This may mean that methods start at an individual level or with more or less homogenous groups before you bring diverse perspectives together. It may also mean that you end up deciding to exclude some stakeholders and perspectives, as long as the reasoning behind this is made explicit.

Openness, transparency, and curiosity, together with low thresholds for participation, are seen as important ways to mitigate these challenges.

#### 3.2 Empowering:

Useful methods for empowering are those that support learning and adaptation, that support the confrontation of power and the overcoming of obstacles, and that connect knowledge to action. They can include theatre of the oppressed, photovoice, futuring approaches that connect the future to the past and the present (particularly when they focus on 'how did we get here' and on what can we do, what could have been done differently and how might we use this to inspire alternative future visions), and reflexive monitoring to harness and share learning, and enable adaptive action.

Challenges:

1 What empowerment means depends on the situation. Empowerment can involve making people more effective in existing systems, but the challenge is that this creates interdependencies and can prevent challenging and changing these existing systems. Empowerment can also mean confronting power structures, but it is important to recognize that this is not always possible, safe, or appropriate. Finally, empowerment can take the form of emancipation, aimed at making people less dependent on existing systems and refuse them without necessarily aiming at overthrowing them. However, this may prevent wider transformations from taking place.

Open reflection on assumptions and expectations can help prevent these challenges and identify what approaches to empowerment or emancipation are safe, effective, and appropriate in different contexts.

Design-based methods could be explored as a way of making explicit assumptions, which might be taken for granted or subconsciously held. By bringing to life assumptions of diverse groups, more systemic conditions could also start to emerge and the status quo, which would need to be altered (methods for empowerment could relate to the challenging of the status quo).

### 3.3 Politicising:

Politicising methods can support analysis of where the main political oppositions and struggles are, including the identification of dominant power relations, values and problem frames, vested interests, and obstacles for change as well as the perspectives that are marginalized and suppressed. Methods can include media and policy analysis, discourse, framing or narrative analysis, and interviews. Co-design workshops aimed at co-framing issues could also be a way of bringing to the fore different perspectives and values around biodiversity in various contexts, as long as the co-design is also cognisant of the importance of Pluralising.

Challenges:

Politicising methods can also support the critical examination and confrontation of power. In that interpretation, it is important to reflect on when politicization is appropriate and what risks might be involved (see empowerment). Also, it is important to be mindful of pluralism and identify marginalized perspectives. This is important to avoid simplistic understandings of who has power and how power is exercised and ensure that the analyses align with the lived realities of the people involved. Openness, as well as organizing feedback and validation can address these challenges. An additional way of addressing these challenges involves data analysis – how to make sense of the data gathered in ways that resonate with, and could be useful for the marginalised participants, and to enhance / create capacity for acting on emerging issues (e.g., ‘user-generated user guides’, open ‘citizen-science’ like tools).

### 3.4 Embedding:

Methods for embedding can support making connections with similar initiatives, or with actors at policy levels or businesses that are not directly involved in the initiative. Methods can include walkshops which invite these actors to the place and enable them to connect through multisensory experiences, futuring where actors are invited to join the creation of future visions, and discourse, framing or narrative analysis aimed at identifying how local initiatives can connect to wider political and cultural contexts, as well as how these contexts can align with the initiatives.

Challenges:

The main challenges of embedding are related to the risk of initiatives becoming co-opted by dominant systems and powerful actors. This can result in the exclusion of marginalized perspectives, the loss of identity, and disempowerment.

Facilitation and the creation of a safe space are seen as ways to address these challenges. Developing capabilities for critical thinking and reflexivity could help initiatives in preserving their identities in the longer-term.

### 3.5 Concluding remark

As can be seen from the discussion above, the PEPE framework lends provides an ethical orientation to the BioTraCes research that helps create awareness of the dynamics of in- and exclusion, challenges and dilemmas involved in Participatory Action Research. It is important to recognize that these dilemmas are to some extent unavoidable and there are no easy answers or generalizable instructions to address them. Instead, the next chapter of this deliverable will offer two general approaches for research ethics.

## 4 Addressing ethical challenges in BioTraCes

This section aims to present possible responses to the kinds of ethical dilemmas and challenges identified together with the consortium partners in relation to the project. One of these focuses on the creation of transparency about expectations and about the terms of participation to make sure that participants understand and consent with the research process and also have clarity about how and when they can withdraw this consent. However, this type of standardized informed-consent procedures comes with limitations. For example, participation can be very dynamic with new people entering or leaving at different moments in time, participation can take place in groups which does not fit well with the signing of individual forms, or participation can involve people that prefer not to give formal consent. For these reasons, a one-size-fits-all type of informed consent may not be adequate, and instead progressive forms of consent or consent models for obtaining group permissions are required.

. In what follows, we present the main elements of the current approach to ethics that is typically demanded for research involving human subjects by academic institutions, as well as two other frameworks, which aim to provide guiding principles for a more dynamic and progressive approach research ethics that support participatory action research on the ground.

### 4.1 Institutional ethics procedures

Traditional ethical procedures, as employed in academic institutions in Europe, tend to be based on four main normative principles (Bussu et al, 2021):

- I. Respect for autonomy, which refers to the decision-making capacities of participants, by enabling them to make reasoned, informed choices.
- II. Beneficence, which refers to considering the balance of benefits of participating in the research against risks and costs.
- III. Non-maleficence, which refers to avoiding causation of harm.
- IV. Justice, which refers to ensuring the benefits of the research are equally distributed across all groups in society.

These ethical principles can provide an important initial framework for a research project, for instance in terms of making the researcher more aware of potential methodological aspects that could negatively impact the research participants. However, they are less suited to guide the researcher in practice, while conducting the research, particularly in the case of participatory action research. One significant reason here is that participatory action research is based on an epistemology that sees knowledge to be embedded in social relationships and most powerful when produced collaboratively through action (Hawkins, 2007). Thus, research is conducted *with* rather than *on* participants, with the aim to democratise research by addressing issues of power and hierarchy, often present in traditional positivist research approaches (Jacobs, 2018). Since this requires less control from the part of the researcher, many outcomes of the research cannot be known, or even planned for, in advance of performing the work. As such, they are hard to predict and therefore insufficiently addressed through the kinds of ethical principles included in institutional approaches.

As already raised by the consortium partners in the BioTraCes project, participatory research involves not only individuals but also collectives. This suggests that ethics needs to account also for groups, which is at odds with institutional ethical principles that typically target individuals (e.g., through individually signed informed consent). Furthermore, many decisions are taken as the project progresses to account for the research needs of the participants, which may change depending on their needs at the time. Thus, the research focus may need to be renegotiated, while the numbers of participants and their involvement could also vary over the course of the project. Thus, institutional ethics fail short in assisting ethics-in-practice, or 'everyday ethics' (Bussu et al, 2021).

### 4.2 Ethics-in-practice

Ethics-in-practice refers to the kinds of concerns and dilemmas that arise during the research and can only be articulated in a meaningful way when they occur. To address the limitations discussed above, which are posed by institution ethics procedures when carrying out participatory action research on the ground, we propose that a more widely encompassing ethical approach is better suited to the research involved in BioTraCes project. In the following sub-sections, we highlight two such alternative



approaches, one informed by commitment to epistemic justice (section 3.2.1) and another one that draws on feminist principles of care (section 3.2.2).

**Based on horizontal epistemology and epistemic justice**

The first alternative approach to ethics is inspired by the work of Dutch public health researcher Tineke Abma and her international collaborators in the context of medical research (Abma, 2019). It departs from the existing institutional ethics procedures by explicitly addressing the researcher as a reflexive practitioner. That positions ethics as a process that is adaptive and organic, centred on emotions and relationships, and providing principles that support collaborative working to identify the right course of action, mutual learning, and reflection. The aim of such an approach to ethics-in-practice is to stimulate “a more public, reflexive culture in the field of participatory research” (Abma, 2020, p.3), therefore going beyond the institutional requirement of acquiring approval for pre-determined moments of interaction with participants.

This ethics framework involves a participatory action research and responsive evaluation approach grounded in horizontal epistemology, which challenges the vertical epistemology that positions the researcher as the expert standing above laypersons in the production of knowledge. The framework is characterised by five main aspects, as summarised in the table below.

*Table 1: Ethics-in practice approach based on horizontal epistemology and epistemic justice (after Abma 2020)*

Aims	Characteristics	Requirements	Challenges
<b>Transformational</b>	heighten people’s understanding of their situations (i.e. personal understanding and mutual understanding of others’ perspectives); mutual dialogical learning process promoting collective action to transform current situations	organise and facilitate this dialogue	moral dilemmas and emotion work resulting from when various perspectives come together
<b>Epistemic justice</b>	practical-professional knowledge and existential-experiential knowledge are equally valued to scientific knowledge; artistic representations are valid sources of knowledge	actively include the voices of those whose issues / values are at stake and may have been marginalised previously	this type of knowledge may be easily silenced due to its nature (e.g. more chaotic, messy, not predictable)
<b>Situating knowledge</b>	knowledge is always interpreted and constructed and seen through one’s own specific situation and perspective on the world (situated worldview)	make space for various voices to highlight different views on a situation	including the voices of those otherwise marginalised can lead to tension as their questions may point towards different phenomena and understandings of situation
<b>Personal and embodied experience</b>	personal involvement of researchers and awareness and appreciation of personal motives and experiences as rich sources of knowledge	researchers place themselves under scrutiny as opposed to presenting themselves as impartial	developing more horizontal relationships with co-researchers (‘participants’)

<p><b>Communicative</b></p>	<p>Instead of aiming for harmony, challenge the traditional asymmetry between lived experience as a form of valuable knowledge and the taught knowledge of 'experts'; focus on learning together to create new ways of acting on a situation</p>	<p>critical thinking, listening, questioning, dialogue, self-reflection about one's own identity and positionality of power (e.g., education, race, role, research knowledge</p>	<p>certain things cannot be said and cannot be expressed in words thus needing other forms of expressions, like art</p>
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**Based on ethics of care**

The second alternative approach to ethics draws on feminist principles of care, as discussed by Bussu et al (2021) in relation to challenges based by carrying out participatory action research in a researcher-in-residence role. This type of research approach, while helpful to enable knowledge coproduction by positioning the researcher within an organisation, it highlights important ethical challenges. Specifically, these relate to the boundaries between the researcher and the participants, which stem from the fact that the researcher is immersed in the context under evaluation. Such situations are not considered by institutional ethical procedures and the kinds of approval requirements fail short in supporting the everyday dilemmas that a researcher might encounter when conducting this type of participatory action research. Nevertheless, conducting research in residence is an approach that can benefit the research aims of the BioTraCes project.

Like the previously discussed framework (section 3.2.1), this approach to ethics-in-practice also places an emphasis on reflexivity. However, it expands this notion by drawing on feminist epistemology and ethics (Noddings, 1988, Moody-Adams, 1997) rooted in relationships of caring, and being cared for. These are seen to better guide research processes that entail reflexive and overt exploration of power and interests, particularly important during research in residence. The framework accounts for the subjectivity of the researcher and the emotional work often underpinning this form of participatory action research. These aspects are not addressed by traditional institutional ethics processed, which assume a certain objectivity and predictability of the research process. The table below highlights the key distinctions between current institutional ethics principles and issues that might emerge on the ground when conducting participatory action research.

*Table2: Institutional ethics vs. ethics-in-practice through an ethics of care framework (after Bussu et al, 2021)*

<p>Institutional ethics vs. ethics-in-practice</p>	<p>Main considerations</p>	<p>Challenges posed by institutional ethics</p>	<p>Opportunities offered by ethics of care</p>
<p><b>Institutional ethics procedures</b></p>	<p>Predictability of process and outcome</p>	<p>The number of participants and the way they are involved can vary greatly over the course of the study and may be hard to predict</p>	<p>Acknowledges that in a participatory study, things can develop in unexpected ways</p>
	<p>Informed consent</p>	<p>One signed consent form does not always equate informed consent</p>	<p>Reflective approach to issues of ongoing or requiring communal consent</p>
	<p>Anonymity and confidentiality</p>	<p>Can be difficult to guarantee when participants know each other well</p>	<p>Fosters safe spaces Promotes early discussions in the project to enable both researchers and</p>

			participants to have greater awareness of communal, as well as individual risks and benefits
<b>Everyday ethical issues that arise when doing research</b>	Power dynamics	Role of “outside expert” does not fit the democratic ethos of participatory action research	Promotes an understanding of different meanings that actors ascribe to the research Emphasis on developing relationships of trust and rapport
	Data ownership and interpretation	Participants can feel exploited and / or stigmatised	Transparency in data analysis, rapport-building, opportunities for feedback
	Blurred boundaries between researcher(s) and participants	Challenge of keeping critical, ‘objective’ distance	Reflective approach with a focus on keeping track of power relations and potential bias

## 5 Conclusions

The two alternative ethics frameworks outlined in the previous section provide guidance to the kinds of dilemmas and challenges that are envisaged to be encountered in the BioTraCes project when conducting participatory action research on the ground. Both frameworks highlight the need for reflexive processes that continuously reassess relationships of power between the researcher and the participants (which may thus be seen as ‘co-researchers’).

The first framework, which is based on horizontal epistemology and epistemic justice, provides higher level principles, focused on making visible and equally valuing diverse forms of knowledge, like embodied, experiential knowledge, and forms of representation, such as art. By allowing for openness and flexibility, these principles can be adopted in different research contexts and translated into appropriate guidance for a diversity of cases.

The second framework, based on ethics of care, provides opportunities for addressing challenges posed by institutional ethics procedures when aiming to carry out inclusive and ethically sound participatory action research processes in practice. By making explicit potential challenges, such as those that may arise in relation to informed consent, this framework helps support researchers in determining more suitable approaches. For instance, it points to a form of progressive informed consent, which allows for reflection on issues that require ongoing or communal consent.

With practice comes the unpredictability of outcomes. As raised by participatory action research scholars mentioned here (Abma, 2021, Bussu et al 2020), such approach to research comes from an ethos of democratising knowledge and its production and use. This challenges the traditional relationships between the ‘expert’ research and the ‘lay’ participant. Moreover, the relationships to be addressed are not only between researchers and participants but extends to a wider community and ecosystem of human and non-human actors emerging around the actions that generate knowledge coproduction. This requires reflexivity, attention, and care for all those involved or potentially affected, including non-human actors. In turn, this indicates that ethical responsibility is also relational, extending beyond the academic researchers to the wider consortium and their societal partners.

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