

Ethnography Guidance for Researchers: Considerations for Conducting Ethnographic Research

We understand that ethnographic studies evolve over time, and that maintaining regulatory compliance is a process. Our goal is to help you to prepare, and engage in dialogue with Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) officers at your institution.

What is ethnography and ethnographic research?

Ethnography involves the study of human behavior in the settings where people live and work. It emphasizes the study of people and communities, and aims to describe social contexts, relationships, and processes.¹ Ethnographic research uses a variety of qualitative data collection methods, including, but not limited to, observation, surveys, and interviews.

IRB considerations for ethnographic research:

When deciding if IRB approval is necessary, the first question a researcher should consider is whether the project is considered to be *research* involving *human participants*. Under the Common Rule (the federal regulations that govern IRB procedures), research is defined as “systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge.” Human participants are “living individual(s) about whom an investigator conducting research obtains: (1) data through intervention or interaction with the individual; or (2) identifiable private information.”²

Therefore, a study is considered to be research with human participants if it is conducted with the goal of drawing conclusions with general applicability, and if the researcher interacts *with*, designs an intervention *for*, or collects identifiable private information *from*, people. Using these definitions, your IRB, HRPP, or institution will consider whether ethnographic research requires IRB review on a case-by-case basis.

Some ethnographic research might be considered “[exempt](#)” because it falls into one of the lowest risk categories. You should confirm with your IRB or HRPP office that you are following the policy of your institution, as federal regulations describe a minimal standard.

Because of the unpredictable nature of observing life as it happens, ethnographers might have a difficult time succinctly describing their projects in an IRB protocol. We hope that this guide clarifies the information needed from researchers in order to approve an ethnographic IRB proposal when flexibility is needed.

Consider where you might publish:

Although publication does not confer generalizability, keep in mind that some journals require proof of IRB approval for all papers that are presented for publication. If you have an idea of where you might want to publish your work, it is a good idea to take a look at the journal’s requirements.

¹ <https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethnography-and-institutional-review-boards/>

² <https://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/regulations-and-policy/regulations/45-cfr-46/index.html>

How should I approach the IRB application form?

Ethnography is often experiential, exploratory, and may have blurred boundaries between data collection and the researcher's regular activities and communication.^{3,4} We understand that some questions on an IRB application may be more applicable to other types of research, and we understand that you may need to keep your research plans flexible until you are in the process of data collection. With this in mind, here is some information that IRB reviewers may look for in your application:

- What types of methodology will you use in the field? Observations? Interviews? Surveys?
- Do you need special permission from anyone to collect data? For example, if you conduct ethnography in an office, you will need a letter of permission from the company whose office the research will be conducted in. You should attach this letter to your application.
- If you plan to collect data internationally, refer to the Office of Human Research Protections' (OHRP) [International Compilation of Human Research Standards](#) and/or your institution's international research policies. Be sure that you are adhering to any guidelines that exist in the community where you will collect data.
- It is understood that you may not know your exact sample size until you are in the field, particularly with observations, so it is fine to make an estimate, but it should be an estimate reasonably consistent with the scale of the research you plan to do, and the sites you intend to include. You can submit an amendment later if you need to request a larger sample size, but consider that it is better to err on the side of a higher estimate, rather than over-enrolling participants without an amendment, which may constitute noncompliance.
- When describing recruitment, explain how you will introduce yourself as a researcher to participants. If you plan to introduce yourself to a larger community (such as a church or community organization), explain how and where you will do this, and include a loose script of what you plan to say. Recruitment may be an ongoing process, but it is important to have a planned approach and be mindful of appropriate permissions. If you have a compelling reason for not immediately alerting a community to your presence, make sure to explain why this is the case.
- Ethnographic interviews will often require flexibility and improvisation. When submitting your interview or focus group instruments, it is important that you include the primary questions you intend to ask participants. It is understood that you will likely ask different follow-up questions depending on how the conversation unfolds, but you should be able to share the general topics you plan to address, and the questions that you know that

³ www.gc.cuny.edu/sites/default/files/2021-06/Ethnography-Research-Guidance-11-12-20.pdf

⁴ Arwood, T., & McGough, H., 2007 PRIM&R SBER Conference

you intend to ask. This is especially important for topics and questions of a sensitive nature, as this may change the IRB's risk assessment.

When do I need site permission?

Some sites will have strict processes in place that researchers must follow before collecting data, such as in school districts or certain communities. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure that they have satisfied these site-specific requirements before submitting their protocol.

If you are simply observing behavior, it is helpful to consider public versus private behavior. According to the [Common Rule](#), private behavior "occurs in a context in which an individual can reasonably expect that no observation or recording is taking place, and [that] information that has been provided for specific purposes by an individual...will not be made public (e.g., a meeting among managers and staff at a business or other organization, or an interaction between a health care or social services provider and a patient or client)."

Public behavior refers to behavior taking place in a publicly accessible location in which the subject does not have an expectation of privacy (e.g., a public plaza or park, a street, a building lobby, a government building). If subjects have a reasonable expectation of privacy, both site permission and consent will generally be required. The fact that a researcher, or anyone else, may enter a building without explicit permission does not necessarily mean that it can be considered a public place. For instance, although a church might not, as a practical matter, typically ask people entering for their names or intentions, members of a particular congregation might reasonably assume that all entering are doing so to worship rather than to "observe or record". Please also review the "Do I need a consent form?" section below.

It is important to note that a site permission letter is not the same thing as a consent form. A site permission letter can be very short, typically just a few sentences, and can be submitted in the form of an email. In some cases, you might need a site permission letter but not a consent form. Every submission to the IRB is considered on a case-by-case basis, so you should contact your IRB or HRPP if you have questions about this or anything else.

Do I need a consent form?

Consent forms are not needed for observations in a public space as long as the observations are recorded in a way that makes it impossible to identify subjects, and the observations would not be likely to place the subject at legal, financial, or reputational risk if they became known. Otherwise, you do need a consent form. Most places consider audio and visual recordings to contain personally identifiable information due to the unique nature of voices and faces, even in the absence of overt identifiers. You should also be aware that laws differ between states and it is important to consider local context when conducting research across state lines.

There is often no direct benefit to participants in ethnographic studies. There may be some risks, such as an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. Researchers should consider these factors when composing their consent forms.

Depending on the population and cultural context, written consent may not be appropriate for the project. For this purpose, it is often helpful, when applicable, to distinguish between primary

subjects and secondary or incidental subjects. For example, when researchers shadow specific subjects about whom they record information of research interest, IRB approval would probably require written consent of those primary subjects. On the other hand, the researcher might not have to obtain written consent from other persons with whom a primary subject might interact during the course of observation. Such other persons in this context would be regarded as secondary or incidental subjects. In any case, researchers should provide a strong rationale in their protocol if another type of consent process (such as verbal consent) is most appropriate for the setting.

Summary

Many ethnographic studies take years, and involve relationships that may change over time. This means that in your protocol, you should describe how you will get consent in a way that is culturally appropriate, and how you can continually obtain consent from participants.

Questions?

Please contact your institution's IRB or HRPP office to discuss your plans for ethnographic research.