



Ethnographic Research

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February 2010

Research Compliance Office

“...it is sad when the only person you can talk to is a translator”

- Boa Sr, last remaining member of the Bo tribe on the Andaman Islands



Ethnography

- Study of human behavior in the natural setting in which a population lives
- Intended to reveal common cultural understandings

Researchers immerse themselves into the culture to conduct the fieldwork

Is a branch of cultural anthropology

Focuses on a community; not necessarily geographic

Ethnographic Method

- **Begins:** with selection of a culture (after studying literature pertaining to the culture)
- **Next:** cultural immersion of the researcher



- gains “entrance” to the population under study
- lives within the population
- obtains an informant; someone within the culture that acts as a “guide” or interpreter

- **Ends with** : data analysis and theory development

Ethnographical Terms and Types

- **Macro-ethnography** – study of broadly-defined groups, for example “New Yorkers”
- **Micro-ethnography** – narrowly defined cultural groups, e.g., Japanese pearl divers



Ethnographical Terms and Types

- **Emic perspective** – study how members of a given culture perceive their world
- **Etic perspective** – study of how non-members of a group interpret behavior of a given culture



Ethnographical Terms and Types

- **Tacit knowledge** – studying a deeply-embedded cultural belief (emic perspective) using knowledge that is rarely or never discussed and must be inferred by the ethnographer



Is ethnography subject to IRB review?

- Requires IRB review/oversight to ensure that the participants are not harmed
- Is complex, variable, and of differing durations and levels of risk – requires case by case review



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HOWEVER...

- No manipulation of subject or their environment
- No hypothesis or theory before the research has begun
- Differs from survey-related research



Risks

- Discrimination
- Political risks
- Disruption of personal, family or community relationships
- Risks regarding filming or recording individuals
- Harms can also include involvement in conflictive environments
- Offending community authority



Benefits



http://picasaweb.google.com/lh/photo/TjNdf_foKka1rxaDRTjARg

- Helping people to record their ways of life as part of heritages that could otherwise be lost, aka: dead languages
- Interviews can also affirm the values of the subject
- Recognition of the needs and rights of the subjects not previously known

Exempt Review

- 45 CFR 46.101(b) – includes research that:



- Takes place in educational setting
- Involves educational tests that are not individually identifiable
- Involves an observation that deal with public behavior (e.g., public officials)
- Collection or study of existing data if this is publically available

http://www.delivery.superstock.com/WI/23/2029/PreviewComp/SuperStock_2029-Z258.jpg

Expedited Review

Most ethnographic research involves minimal risk.

- IRB **cannot presume** that all ethnographic research is minimal risk
- Researcher must study/learn about possible risks to the subjects **prior to beginning his or her research** –
 - IRB can require PD to state what steps were taken to ensure understanding of the possible risks prior to commencement



Informed Consent and Ethnography

- Researcher bears the responsibility to ensure that informed consent process involves:



Communication
Comprehension
Voluntary participation

- PD must remember that the informed consent process is interactive and on-going

Informed Consent and Ethnography

- Written documentation may not be possible because of:

- » Illiteracy
- » Language is unknown/not written
- » Human rights concerns

The IRB should consider granting ethnographers waivers to written informed consent

Common Rule also allows for oral informed consent - 45 CFR 46.117(c)



Photo by P. Arey 2009

Resources

- American Anthropological Association (AAA) Code of Ethics
www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/ethcode.htm
- North Carolina State University Public Administration :
Ethnographic Research
<http://faculty.chass.ncsu.edu/garson/PA765/ethno.htm>
- AAA Statement on Ethnography and the IRB
<http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/irb.htm>
- Category 7 of Guidance Issued Under the Common Rule
www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm

