**University of California, Irvine**

**Human Research Protections**

**Education & Guidance Document**

## 

## Title: IRB Guidelines for Anthropology Students[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**Audience: Anthropology Students / Ethnographic Researchers**

Most anthropology protocols involve ethnographic research (including observation, participant observation, interviews, group discussions, audio-visual records, etc.) and require IRB approval. Ethnographic research, also called fieldwork, involves observation of and interaction with the persons or groups being studied in the group's own environment, often for long periods of time. If you aren’t sure whether this applies to your Faculty Sponsor or contact Human Research Protections (aka ‘[the IRB](http://www.research.uci.edu/compliance/human-research-protections/about-the-irb/hrp-contact-list.html)’). If IRB approval is required, you must have it before beginning research.

If you’re going to spend a semester or summer abroad, plan ahead by submitting an IRB proposal well in advance before you leave or by doing the preparation work so that you’ll be in a position to apply while there. *Don’t put yourself in a position of applying for IRB approval for research already conducted. The IRB will not provide retroactive IRB approval.*

### **What the IRB Wants to See From You**

All ethnographic projects involve some risk to participants. The IRB wants to see evidence that:

* You have thought carefully about the kinds of risk your project might entail,
* You will take measures to minimize risk when possible and appropriate,
* You will clearly communicate risks to potential participants so that they can decide whether or not they want to be included in your research.

The IRB also wants to see well thought-out projects. Aside from ethical considerations, it is not their responsibility to determine your topic or methodology. However, they are likely to interpret a poorly planned project as evidence that you have not devoted enough time and thought to ethical considerations, and they may be more attuned to potential problems as a result.

### **Steps of an IRB Application**

1. Complete the [required educational training.](http://www.research.uci.edu/compliance/human-research-protections/researchers/training-and-education.html)
2. Determine whether your project qualifies for full, expedited, or exempt review by consulting the [UCI HRP website](http://www.research.uci.edu/compliance/human-research-protections/researchers/levels-of-review.html).
3. Complete the Protocol Narrative – applicable to the level of risk for your project (e.g., exempt or expedited). All IRB forms and applications are available on the UCI HRP website under, [‘Human Research Protections.’](http://www.research.uci.edu/forms/index.html) You will want to access the documents under ‘Protocol Narratives’ and ‘Consent Forms.’
4. Complete the Consent Document. This will be either a ‘Study Information Sheet’ or a “Informed Consent Document Template for Social Behavioral.’
5. Now, using the information in the Protocol Narrative and Consent Document, complete the [Application for IRB Review](http://apps.research.uci.edu/irbapp). As part of the Application for IRB Review, you will need to complete [Appendix I](http://www.research.uci.edu/forms/docs/irb-appendices/appendixI.doc) for Ethnographic Research/Fieldwork. You may need to complete additional Appendices if you are conducting research off site, or involving vulnerable populations. The Application for IRB Review will prompt you as to what additional documents may be needed.
6. When ready, confirm your materials are complete and accurate with your faculty sponsor and submit!
7. Few protocols are approved on the first application, so be prepared to revise and resubmit. Factor this into the timeline of your research.

### **Points to Consider When Completing Your Protocol**

1. The submission process requires you to fill out an online form (the Application for IRB Review) as well as WORD attachments (the Protocol Narrative and Consent Document). Familiarize yourself with the forms. Be consistent across all documents.
2. Explain the topic of your protocol in a straightforward manner. Again, there should be minimal theory and no jargon.
3. If you are including vulnerable populations (e.g., children, prisoners, pregnant women), specify the population and describe any special precautions you will use. You will need to complete additional Appendices, available on the HRP website. The Application for IRB Review will guide you as to what needs to be completed.
4. How will you recruit participants? The most common anthropological method of recruitment is “snowball sampling,” in which you ask participants to introduce you to or give you the names of other possible participants. You might describe other methods, such as approaching people in a specific location.
5. Describe your research procedures. Include descriptions of the tasks your participants will be asked to do and how much time will be expected of them. For example:

I will conduct interviews with [type of participants]. The interviews are designed to last 30-45 minutes and will be audio recorded with the participants’ permission. They will take place [location(s)].

I will observe and take notes on naturally occurring interactions and conversations among [place/people/situation].

I will conduct participant observation: I will observe and take notes on naturally occurring interactions and conversations among [place/people/situation] and I will also participate [in such-and-such by doing such-and-such].

1. Identify your research methods. A project may involve multiple research methods, but distinguish clearly between them in your proposal. For example, if you are going to sit in on a group therapy session, take notes, and engage in casual conversation with clients but you yourself are not a client, you should describe the research as “observation.” If you are also a client in the group therapy session, you should describe the research as “participant observation.” If you are going to ask clients specific questions, you should describe that aspect of the research as “interviews.”
2. Anthropological interviews almost always involve conversation and improvisation. The IRB will need to access the type of questions you will ask when interviewing or engaging with research subjects. This must be uploaded as part of the Application for IRB Review. This is your chance to reflect on your topic and figure out how you might elicit useful responses from your participants. Make a sincere effort to identify the questions you will ask. If you think of other questions you want to ask later on or during the interviews, you do not need to revise the protocol with the IRB as long as those new questions are consistent with the ones you included in the application. If you decide to ask questions on an entirely new topic, you will need to submit a [modification](http://apps.research.uci.edu/irmod) to the IRB to revise the protocol.
3. Consider Risks and Benefits;
   * Physical—most anthropology projects don’t involve physical risk, but they may if you are asking participants to do something active, like give you a walking tour.
   * Psychological—participants may experience stress, discomfort, guilt, embarrassment, etc. when thinking and talking about their experiences and opinions on particular topics.
   * Social—participants may encounter stigma or condemnation by peers.
   * Economic—this is not usually relevant for anthropological research unless your study takes participants away from profitable activity.

* + Benefits of anthropological research may include contributing to the public record and understanding of a particular social phenomenon, having the opportunity to reflect and share important experiences, and/or assessing the challenges and needs of particular groups and institutions.

1. Consent considerations;

* Participant observation may require a [Letter of Permission](http://www.research.uci.edu/forms/docs/irb-appendices/letter-of-permission-template.docx) from a “gatekeeper” of the institution/organization involved (e.g. the director, owner, manager).
* Participant observation and observation usually require informed consent from participants as well. If it is not feasible to present each individual with a written consent form, think about how you might make people aware of your research and give them the opportunity to opt out of participation (such as by using a Study Information Sheet). If they opt out, do not include them in your notes or project.
* Observation in a public place does not require informed consent as long as:
* Those observed are not children
* The observations are recorded in a manner such that the subjects cannot be identified
* The observations could not reasonably place the subject at risk (legal, financial, employment, reputation) if they became known outside the research.
  + Use written consent unless you have a reason to use oral consent instead. In the case of oral consent, you still will need a written document to provide to the participant – and guide the consent process. Also, you will need to request a waiver of documentation of consent from the IRB (by completing the applicable Appendix). You will need to complete a Study Information Sheet to consent participants.

Additional Considerations

* + You may need multiple forms. For example, if you plan to interview minors, you will need an assent form for the child (children cannot legally give informed consent) and a consent form for the guardian parent.
* You need to include special provisions for photography and videotaping.
* For all consent and assent forms, use clear, simple language that is easy to understand.

1. What procedures will you use to ensure that the information your participants provide will remain confidential?

Don’t confuse the terms “confidentiality” and “anonymity.” In the former, you know the identity of the participant but keep it private. In the latter, you do not know the identity of the participant. In most cases, you will be maintaining confidentiality, not anonymity.

Will you use pseudonyms in your project? If not, that’s fine, but you must make it clear in the proposal and consent forms that you will be using real names. You may also want to include in the proposal a justification for using real names.

Think not only about the individuals but also about the places and organizations. In order to preserve confidentiality, it may be necessary to change those as well. If so, include a statement to that effect in the Protocol Narrative, oral description of the consent process, and consent form itself.

1. How will you store data? A password-protected computer (or file) and a locked container kept in a private office or residence are two good options. Keeping notes in a locked dorm room is not considered secure enough without another layer of protection, such as a locked drawer. You may find other methods as long as they represent a reasonable effort to prevent others from accessing the data.

How long will you keep notes, recordings, and interview transcriptions before destroying them? You have a few options. For many students, it might make most sense to destroy data upon completion of the project. Others may want to save data for use in future research. If you want to save data, you can either specify for how long (for example, ten years would give you opportunity to revisit your notes in graduate school) or make a case for keeping them indefinitely. If you want to keep them indefinitely, it may be useful to cite the American Anthropological Association Statement on Ethnographic Research and Institutional Review Boards:

“The AAA supports the sharing of research data and encourages ethnographers to consider preserving field notes, tapes, videos, etc. as a resource accessible to others for future study. Ethnographers should inform participants of the intent to preserve the data and make it accessible as well as the precautions to be undertaken in the handling of the data.”

Whatever you decide, you must make it clear in the consent/assent forms.

1. Anthropological projects generally should not involve deception. If you think yours does, discuss that with your adviser.

1. A note of thanks to Bard College for sharing content. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)