This document is intended as a guide for ethnographic researchers considering IRB requirements.
Definition of ethnography research

Ethnography involves the researcher's study of human behavior in the natural settings in which people live. Many ethnographers see this type of project as a systematic and methodological approach to research that yields validity from long term immersion and engagement within relationships with research participants. Ethnography research can be used to study culture, social, political, bureaucratic, gender, processes/outcomes. A key strength of ethnography is that it can trace processes within and across cases to explain how, and by what processes, something happened.

Cultural ethnography more specifically involves research of cultural systems or an aspect of culture based on fieldwork in which the investigator is immersed in the ongoing everyday activities of the designated community for the purpose of describing the social context, relationships, and processes relevant to the topic under consideration. These types of ethnographies emphasize the study of persons and communities, in both international and domestic arenas, and involves short or long-term relationships between the researcher and research participants.

- For example, a study which looks at how local retail business closures influence place attachment of a Brooklyn community by conducting survey and interview would fall into the category of ethnography research.

Special characteristics of ethnography research

- It is experiential
- It is interactive
- It is not easily bounded by time and place
- It is often exploratory
- It morphs easily and often (new questions emerge during research)
- The boundaries between normal activities and communication and data collection are not clear because everything becomes data including the ethnographer’s experience

Is ethnography research subject to IRB review?

YES.

According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS) regulations at 45 CFR part 46, ethnography research is subject to IRB review because it involves "a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" and involves human subjects.

Common methods for ethnography research

- **Participant observation**
  - If you are not a regular part of target participant group, you may only observe without engagement or you may casually engage in conversations with clients, take notes, or sit in on a group assembly/meetings/events.
  - If you are a regular part of target participant group, you will engage in conversation with clients, take notes, or sit in on a group assembly/meetings/events that you already plan to attend.

- **Structured and unstructured interviewing**

- **Focused discussions with individuals and community members**

- **Analysis of texts and audio/visual records**

- **Online ethnography observing and engaging with online communities (through groups, social media, virtual**
meetings, etc.)

Is there direct benefit in ethnography research?

It is very likely that there is NO direct benefit to participants in most ethnography studies. Findings of ethnography studies may indirectly contribute to the public record and understanding of a particular social phenomenon. In addition, ethnographies may contribute to reflections on shared important experiences, and/or assessing the challenges and needs of particular groups and institutions.

Are there risks associated with ethnography research?

The most typical risks in ethnography research are:

- Invasion of privacy
- Stigmatization
- Breach of confidentiality

BUT! other aspects of risks participants may encounter also need to be considered, such as:

- **Physical:** Some tasks/requests (e.g., walking tour, modeling activities or procedures that involve physical activity or manipulation) may result in the potential of physical risk.

- **Psychological:** Participants may experience stress, discomfort, guilt, embarrassment, etc. due to the topics and issues discussed/observed/recorded.

- **Social:** Participants may encounter stigma or condemnation by peers when exposed as participants in research or by sharing sensitive information.

Consent considerations for ethnography research

Some key components of the consent process are:

- **Communication of information:**
  How you will introduce yourself and your study as a researcher to a target population. You need to provide a recruitment script for this process.

- **Comprehension of information:**
  How you will obtain consent to your study. You can use either a typical informed consent template for documented consent or an oral consent template as the regulations do provide the option to waive the signature requirement and instead obtain consent verbally.

  The typical informed consent template may not be appropriate depending on your specific population and their language, culture, literacy, or other specifics.

  If you plan to use an oral consent process, please provide a general script or a list of points you will cover during the consent.
Translation of consent forms and recruitment materials:
If your informed consent document needs to be translated into any language in addition to or instead of English, you need to provide a translated copy to the informed consent and an attestation of translation accuracy with your IRB application. You can find informed consent documents at CUNY HRPP Policies & Procedures.

Voluntary participation:
You need to inform your potential participants that participation to your study is voluntary. You also need to consider how people in this setting let you know if they don’t want to participate. Different environments and cultural norms must be considered.

Elements of Informed Consent
The following elements need to be laid out in the consent form and explained during the consent process.

- The purpose of your study and target population
- The research sites and locations
- Expected duration of participation
- Participant’s tasks (e.g., interview) and methods (e.g., audio/video recording)
- A description of any risks or potential benefits (both direct and indirect)
- A discussion of how confidentiality of data will be maintained
- Explanation of compensation if applicable
- Contact information

Informed consent is NOT required for observation in a public place as long as:

- Those observation are not children.
- The observations are recorded in a manner such that 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.

Procedures in ethnography research

- You need to provide information on the tasks your participants will be asked to do and how much time will be expected of them.
- If your study involves audio/photo/video use during interviews, permission must be given to record.
- Participants must be informed of what the topics are to be discussed and evaluated as well as be given a general purpose of the study. All questionnaires, interview questions, and tasks/materials must be submitted with your application and reviewed and approved by the IRB.

Confidentiality and data management
Confidentiality of data must be maintained both during and after data collection. You need to lay out a detailed plan on how you will be maintaining confidentiality of your participants’ data in your IRB application.

Some data security considerations:
- During data collection, if you will use pseudonyms to protect your participant’s confidentiality, you need to make it clear in your application. If you will use their real names, you need to provide a justification.
- To preserve confidentiality after the data collection, you need to provide your plan for where you will store the data with multiple layers of protection (e.g., password-protected computer/laptop, locked file cabinet, lab/office/home).
Documents required for IRB application

☐ HSR CITI completion certificate of all listed research personnel (including faculty advisor)
☐ Informed consent form(s) (documented and/or oral consent)

If applicable,
☐ Oral consent template
☐ Translated informed consent(s), recruitment materials, and any other participant facing materials
☐ Attestation of translation accuracy signed by the translator
☐ Script/questionnaires for interview
☐ Letter of permission for observation from the institution/organization

More Information

American Anthropological Association
https://www.americananthro.org/ParticipateAndAdvocate/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=1652

CUNY HRPP Policies & Procedures
https://www.cuny.edu/research/research-compliance/human-research-protection-program-hrpp/hrpp-policies-procedures/#1460557807503-ffb0df78-c58c

For one on one consultations or discussions, please contact Rebecca Banchik, CIP, Director of HRPP, rbanchik@gc.cuny.edu.