

IRB Guidelines for Anthropology Students

Bard College

Most anthropology senior projects involve ethnographic research (including observation, participant observation, interviews, group discussions, audio-visual records, etc.) and require IRB approval. If you aren't sure whether this applies to your project, talk to your adviser or consult the Bard IRB website and the Participant Training Course. 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 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 following information is intended to supplement the Bard College IRB website by addressing concerns that emerge frequently in anthropological applications. Additional information is available on the website—use it.

What the IRB wants 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,
- that you will take measures to minimize risk when possible and appropriate,
- and that 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.

Tips

Avoid jargon. Write clearly and for a general audience.

Be consistent. Make sure that the information in the consent form matches the information in the proposal. If you work on the consent form first, much of the information for the proposal can be copied directly from that form (e.g., the statement of risks and benefits.)

Don't rush. Templates and guidelines are useful, but you also must think carefully about your own project and tailor the application and forms to fit it.

Steps of an IRB application

1. Complete the Participant Training Course online and print out two copies of your Completion Certificate. You will need to turn in one copy with your proposal and keep one for your records.
2. Determine whether your project qualifies for full, expedited, or exempt review by consulting the Bard IRB website.
3. Complete a draft of your proposal. Before submitting the proposal to the IRB, you'll need to turn in the rough draft to your adviser, meet to discuss changes, revise, and then give your adviser the final version. Once your adviser approves it, you can submit your proposal to the IRB online. Ask your adviser to send an email to the IRB with your last name in the subject line and the statement, "I have reviewed [your name]'s proposal and I will oversee this research in its entirety."
4. Few proposals are approved on the first application, so be prepared to revise and resubmit. Factor this into the timeline of your research. However, facilitate a quicker approval process by making sure that your proposal is complete and polished as well as by following IRB deadlines for revisions.

IRB Proposal Instructions

The submission process requires you to fill out an online form. Familiarize yourself with the form. Then type the required information (listed below) in a separate document, the one you'll turn in to your adviser. Once you have made revisions and are ready to submit, cut and paste the information into the online form.

1. Decide on a project title. Don't worry; you aren't committed to it.
2. Research question (250 words or less): explain the topic of your senior project in a straightforward manner. Again, there should be minimal theory and no jargon.
3. If you are including "specific populations" (e.g., children, prisoners, pregnant women), specify the population and describe any special precautions you will use. Do additional research to determine what you must include in your application and consent forms. The Bard IRB website has information on doing research with children and prisoners.

If you are only conducting interviews with participants over the age of 18, you need to specify that on the consent form.

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].

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." (Don't use the term "participant observation" when "observation" will suffice.) 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."

6. Email an attachment to the IRB with your list of interview questions. This is your chance to reflect on your topic and figure out how you might elicit useful responses from your participants. If you think of other questions you want to ask later on or during the interviews, you do not need to contact 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 should contact your IRB reviewer, particularly if that new topic introduces additional ethical considerations.

Anthropological interviews almost always involve conversation and improvisation. That's not the point here and should not feature in your application. Make a sincere effort to identify the questions you will ask.

7. How many individuals do you expect to participate?

8. Risks and benefits.

Anthropology projects involving interviews should include the following statement of legal risk:

I will ask participants not to reveal anything that could get them or others in legal trouble. If they say something that either they or I consider incriminating, I will remove that statement from my recording and notes. I will also make it clear that I do not have a legal right to withhold my interview recordings and notes in the event that they are subpoenaed in a court of law.

Other common risks of anthropological research:

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.

Example:

Potential risks of participation include discomfort and embarrassment when thinking and talking about _____. The interview will also take time that could be spent doing something else.

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.

Example:

Potential benefits of participation include the opportunity to reflect on and share one's knowledge of _____.

9. Consent

Participant observation and observation

Participant observation and observation usually require written approval from a "gatekeeper" of the institution/organization involved (e.g. the director, owner, manager). You should create a letter or form for that person to sign. (Note: schools are difficult because you must get permission from the school board.)

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. 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.

Interviews

Interviews require informed consent.

Written or Oral

You should use written consent unless you have a reason to use oral consent instead. In that case, write out an explanation of that reason for the IRB. Regardless of whether you will use written or oral consent, you need to have a written consent statement (for oral consent, you would read the statement but participants would not have to sign it).

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. The Bard IRB website has information on this.

You need to include special provisions for photography and videotaping, also described on the Bard IRB website.

Don't make promises to your participants that you will have a hard time keeping. For this reason, I recommend that you do not tell anyone (participants or the IRB) that you will give participants the chance to approve or reject the quotes that you want to use in your project. Instead, consider including this statement in the consent form and application:

Participants might decide that they do not want information that they shared with me to be made public. At a participant's request, I will remove such statements from my recordings and/or notes and will not use them in my project.

For all consent and assent forms, use clear, simple language that is easy to understand.

See attached consent form template.

10. Write out an oral description of the consent process (i.e. how you will explain the consent form and process). Here is a template (sections in brackets should be adjusted to fit your research plans):

I am a student at Bard College conducting research for my senior project on [short description of project topic]. If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to

[answer questions about topic]. The interview is designed to last approximately [XX] minutes [and will be audio recorded with the participant's permission.] If you're ever uncomfortable for any reason and would like to stop participating, that's OK, just say so.

It's important that you read this consent form carefully. It describes potential risks and benefits of participation. It explains that I plan to [use pseudonyms to preserve confidentiality OR use participants' real names unless they specify otherwise], as well as how I will store data. If you have any questions later on, you can contact me, my faculty adviser, or the chair of the Bard College Institutional Review Board. The contact information is on the consent form. [You can also mark whether or not you want the interview to be recorded and whether it's OK for me to use your real name.]

After you fill out and sign two copies of the form, I'll keep one and you'll keep the other. Do you have any questions?

11. 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. (Research that is truly anonymous—some online research, for example—does not require informed consent as long as you do not include any identifying information.)

a. 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 application, oral description of the consent process, and consent form itself.

b. 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.

c. 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.

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

13. Debriefing statement template:

Thank you for participating in this research for my senior project about [topic]. Please contact me if you have questions in the future or think of anything else you'd like to share. My contact information is on your copy of the consent form. Do you have any questions for me now?

Sources consulted for this document (feel free to use them for more information)

IRB Guidebook Chapter III: Basic IRB Review
http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/irb/irb_chapter3.htm

Bard College Institutional Review Board
www.inside.bard.edu/irb/

American Anthropological Association Statement
on Ethnographic Research and Institutional Review Boards
www.aaanet.org/stmts/irb.htm

Loyola University of Chicago, Sociology Department, Navigating the IRB:
www.luc.edu/sociology/irb_tips.shtml

Consent Form Template (modify the form to fit your own research)

Consent Form

[Date] (*update date each time consent form is revised*)

[Title of Project]

Student Researcher: [Student's name]

Faculty Adviser: [Professor's name]

I am an anthropology student at Bard College, and I am conducting research for my senior project on [topic].

[If you are seeking consent for interviews:] As part of this study, I am inviting [type of people] to participate in interviews. Each interview is designed to last approximately [XX minutes] and will be audio recorded with the participant's permission. Interviews will take place [location(s)], and will include questions about [description of the types of questions to expect.]

[If you are seeking consent for observation:] As part of this study, I will be observing and taking notes on naturally occurring interactions and conversations among [type of people/people in such-and-such setting]. This research will not require additional time or activities from participants.

[If you are seeking consent for participant observation:] As part of this study, I will be [living in such-and-such place; participating in such-and-such activity or organization in such-and-such role]. I will also be observing and taking notes on naturally occurring interactions and conversations among [type of people/people in such-and-such setting]. This research will not require additional time or activities from participants.

During interviews, participants should not reveal anything that could get themselves or others in legal trouble. If they say something that either they or I consider incriminating, I will remove that statement from my recording and notes. However, participants should know that I do not have a legal right to withhold my interview recordings and notes in the event that they are subpoenaed in a court of law.

Other potential risks of participation include [description of risks].

Potential benefits of participation include [description of benefits].

I will maintain participants' confidentiality by changing the names of participants [and of relevant organizations or places] in my senior project. [OR: Participants can specify whether they would like me to use pseudonyms or their real names in my senior project.] I will also keep all interview recordings and notes secure: [recordings will be kept in a locked container and notes in a password protected file on my personal

computer]. I will [destroy all data upon completion of the project; keep data following completion of the project.]

Upon completion, my senior project will be publically available at the Bard College Stevenson Library.

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participants may decide to stop the interview at any time without penalty and may refuse to answer any question, also without penalty.

Participants might decide that they do not want information that they shared with me to be made public. At a participant's request, I will remove such statements from my recordings and/or notes and will not use them in my project.

Please feel free to contact me at any time with questions, concerns, or if you have more information you'd like to share. You can reach me at [Bard email address] and my faculty adviser, [professor's name], at [Bard email address]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the chair of the Bard College Institutional Review Board at irb@bard.edu.

Participant Information *[use these only if relevant; create others as needed]:*

Please check one of the following options *[If you are asking all members of a group for permission to observe their group, you need to provide an option for individuals to opt out altogether]:*

I agree both the interview and the observation.

I agree to the interview only.

I agree to the observation only.

I do NOT want to participate in any part of this research.

Please check one of the following options:

I agree have the interview audio recorded.

I do NOT agree to have the interview audio recorded.

Please check one of the following options:

I understand that my real name may be used in the senior project and any other publication of this research.

I prefer that this interview remain confidential and that my statements be attributed to a pseudonym in the senior project and any other publication of this research.

I am 18 years or older, and I have read and understand the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Printed Name of Research Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date