

JERHRE NOTES

Concepts, Tools, and Resources for Solving Ethical Problems in Human Research

Ethnography & IRBs: A Square Peg in a Round Hole

Ethnographers may spend a year or more as a participant observer, living with people, learning about their world view and way of life. They do not begin with hypotheses or specific questions, as this would impose the researcher's world view on the community – a violation of ethnographers' ethics.

But the ethnographer must submit a protocol to an IRB describing subject selection and recruitment, the consent form, and justification of the number and kind of subjects to be studied – an obvious impossibility; so the ethnographer must ask to speak with the IRB. If the IRB lacks an experienced member who is an ethnographer, it may respond by lecturing the ill-fated ethnographer about how to do *real science* – hypotheses, operational definitions, statistical tests, and such.

Fortunately, some IRBs and ethnographers have found ways to resolve this impasse. The ethnographer takes many steps, typically in consultation with community leaders, to recognize and resolve any ethical problems that may arise in the community context; then documents all of this, and presents it to the IRB. If the IRB finds that the ethnographer's plans to talk with people in their community involve no greater than minimal risk, it grants a waiver of informed consent. Tolich and Fitzgerald describe this process in detail.

Tolich, M. & Fitzgerald, M. (2006). If ethics committees were designed for ethnography. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 1(2), 71-78.

