“…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

Research Compliance Office
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
Is ethnography subject to IRB 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

• 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
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)
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