

**Wheaton College Anthropology Department**  
**Guidelines to Alternative Consent and Risk Reduction Procedures**  
**for Ethnographic Research**

The IRB recognizes that ethnography and participant observation are different from experiments conducted in a laboratory or classroom, and that the standard written consent form may be inappropriate or in some cases hazardous. The IRB also recognizes that such qualitative methods often involve casual conversations with dozens or even hundreds of participants. In most such cases, when the researcher is interacting in a way that is not unusual for that culture, no formal consent is needed. The issue of informed consent arises primarily in the case of key informants, that is, individuals who will be interviewed at length and whose identity is known to the researcher. It is in these cases that risks are most likely to arise, both for the participant and the researcher.

The researcher's plan for protection of subjects' rights ought therefore to be assessed based on three criteria:

**\*Risk:** Provision of explicit enumeration of potential risks that the project might entail in the context of the culture in which the project is to be conducted;

**\*Degree to which participants are informed:** Enclosure of standard written informed consent form or, if using an alternative written or oral consent procedure, the researcher should inform participants of what they will be asked to do, what risks they might be exposed to, how the researcher will handle the interview in terms of confidentiality, and that participation is voluntary and that they might end the interview and withdraw from the study at any time;

**\*Documentation of Consent:** The standard written consent agreement provides documented proof that participants gave informed consent. If the researcher judges that obtaining written consent is inappropriate or risky in itself, the researcher must explain why and explain how documented consent will be obtained (e.g., tape-recording consent, having a witness [research assistant] record in written notes that the participant was fully informed and gave consent, or self-documentation in written notes).

**Suggested Format for Alternative Consent**

1. Detailed description of how you will obtain consent from participants. If you choose to work informed consent procedures into the beginning of the interview, please provide an approximate script. [see sample below]
2. Is the population that you are working with generally literate?
3. Does the population speak English? If not, describe your language proficiency in the participants' native tongue, whether you intend to use a translator and, if so, how you will provide instructions to the translator or assistant regarding confidentiality.

4. If it became widely known that you (or someone associated with you) were interviewing or otherwise associating with an informant, would that expose the informant to any risk from any authority (government agencies, police, employers, parents)?
5. If the content of the interview was read or heard by others, would this be likely to place the informant at risk of status loss or some other social or legal difficulty?
6. Are there any other possible risks (physical, psychological, professional, or personal) to informants?
7. What will you do to protect informants from the risks discussed above?

### **Sample Request for Alternative Consent**

The population I will be working with has low rates of literacy and is not accustomed to signing forms, except at government offices. A written consent form may therefore be intimidating. I will therefore inform participants about the study and their rights orally and I will document their consent as part of the tape-recorded interview (or in notes if participant refuses to be recorded). Because my interview will involve potentially sensitive matters I will take extra measures to safeguard the confidentiality of the interviews. I will not record the participant's name on the oral recording, or in the interview, and will link the interviews to participants using a code number that is recorded in my field notes. I will also specifically tell participants that they can ask me to turn off the microphone or complete the interview at any point and will begin each interview with the following **spoken introduction**:

*As you know, I am an Anthropologist from Wheaton College, North America. I am conducting a study on \_\_\_\_\_ and I would like to ask you some questions about that. I would like to record our conversation, or, if you feel you uncomfortable with that, I will write your answers in my notebook so that I can get your words accurately. If at any time during our conversation you feel uncomfortable answering a question please let me know, and you don't have to answer it. Of, if you want to answer a question, but do not want it recorded or for me to write down your answer, please tell me and I will not record your answer. If at any time you want to withdraw from this study please tell me, and I will erase our conversation. I will not reveal the content of our conversation beyond myself and the people helping me whom I trust to maintain your confidentiality. I will do everything possible to protect your privacy, but there is always a slight chance that someone could find out about our conversation. Now I would like to ask you if you would agree to participate in this study, and to talk to me about \_\_\_\_\_. Do you agree to participate, and to allow me to tape record our conversation or take notes on it*