

February 15, 2013

To: Institutional Review Boards or Ethics Committees

From: The Society for Ethnomusicology

Re: Review of Ethnographic Research by Institutional Review Boards or Ethics Committees

Ethnomusicology, the study of music in its social and cultural contexts, centers on qualitative ethnographic field research in collaboration with human subjects. The Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) advocates that all ethnographic researchers should conduct such research in an ethical manner. Indeed, the need to respect and protect the rights of human subjects in scholarly research is acknowledged by those conducting ethnographic research and reinforced by the ethical codes of professional organizations including the American Anthropological Association, and the American Folklore Society, as well as the Society for Ethnomusicology.

In reviewing applications for ethnographic research, it is essential that Institutional Review Boards and Ethics Committees (henceforth IRBs or ECs)¹ recognize the unique nature and characteristics that distinguish ethnographic research from the clinical and biomedical models that IRB or EC review was originally designed to evaluate, as well as from the more quantitative methods commonly deployed in other social science disciplines, such as psychology, economics, sociology, or education.

It is hoped that the following rationale will clarify our position that in most cases, a determination of “expedited” research, and flexibility in the manner of documenting informed consent, is appropriate, both to protect the rights of human subjects and to allow ethnographic research to be carried out effectively.

In ethnomusicology, ethnographic research employs qualitative methodology primarily through observation, participant-observation, and structured, semi-structured, and unstructured interview, generally including direct involvement in the community and activities of one’s research subjects. These research subjects, or consultants, may be individuals, groups, or entire communities, in rural, urban, or suburban locations. Protecting our consultants’ rights is paramount and, while obtaining informed consent is absolutely necessary, differing local situations require cultural sensitivity and flexibility in our methods of doing so.

In our experience, IRBs and ECs familiar with the field of ethnomusicology recognize that:

- local custom or protocol will dictate the appropriate way for a researcher to inform potential research subjects about the purposes and methods, potential risks and benefits, and plans for the use of ethnographic materials.

¹From country to country, the name given to the committee that reviews human subject research varies, with the most common terms being “Institutional Review Board” or “Ethics Committee.” This document is intended to speak to all such entities that review the ethics of ethnomusicological research.

- oral consent is often more appropriate than written consent.
- if oral consent is deemed appropriate, it should generally be audio/video recorded when recordings of interviews or performances are made.
- informal interaction that may generally inform research but is not recorded nor referenced in relation to named individuals does not require formal consent.

Ethnomusicologists, folklorists, and cultural anthropologists of expressive culture participate in the documentation of important, rare, and emergent aesthetic practices (music, dance, visual art, theatre, ritual and more), and this documentation is intended to be archived and preserved; it is part of the ethical obligation incumbent on the researcher to do so. Research documentation, in the form of field notes, audio and video recordings, photographs, and publications, is therefore important not only to the immediate research project but to the permanent historical record (except in rare cases where specific cultural, religious, or other prohibitions apply). Interviews may be included as part of field research, but unlike conventional experimental procedures, they are most often conducted in the context of the participants' own environment with no (or few and minor) limits and controls exerted by the researcher. While interviewees should be given the option of anonymity, it is essential that ethics reviews take into account the need for and value of identifying consultants in most cases and documenting and preserving their responses.

Ethnographers are committed to cultivating and maintaining relationships with research consultants based on honesty, respect, and sensitivity, and to carry this commitment through every stage of field research, writing, publication, and teaching. We acknowledge that the responsibilities of field research extend beyond the fieldwork setting and often involve a long-term commitment to the rights and concerns of field consultants and their communities.

Of the three levels of review—full review, expedited, and exemption—the most appropriate for the majority of ethnographic research proposals is expedited review, but exemption will sometimes be appropriate, depending on national laws, standards, and regulations, the nature of the research, and risk/benefit analysis.

Ethnographic research generally fits within the parameters for expedited review. For instance, in the United States, expedited review is defined under the Common Rule, Section 46.110, Category 7:

Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. [45 CFR 46.101\(b\)\(2\)](#) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.) (<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/policy/expedited98.html>)

Some applications will fit within the exempt categories of research, as outlined in the Common Rule, Section 46.101 (b) (2):

Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and [emphasis ours] (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.html#46.101>)

We the undersigned respectfully urge IRBs and ECs to consider a determination of “expedited” for the great majority of applications involving ethnomusicological research methodology, as well as acceptance of appropriate, culturally sensitive means of documenting informed consent, including oral consent. In some cases, where there are no reputational issues at stake, and where informants will not be identified, ethnographic research should qualify for exempt status. We are committed to responsible field research practices and support federal and institutional efforts to insure that human research participants are receiving appropriate protections.