

GETTING PERMISSION

When you enter a fieldsite and make yourself known, you must follow many courtesies to make yourself and the people you're observing feel comfortable. All places in which you are a participant-observer involve an official process for "negotiating entry." As a beginning researcher, don't enter a site where you feel at risk in the subculture. For the kinds of projects this book suggests, you will not have adequate time to gain entry or insider status in an intimidating group. One of our students, for example, wanted to research a group of campus skinheads. They permitted Jake to hang out on the edges of their subculture, even allowing him to read their "code of honor," which included these statements:

- Be discreet about new recruits; check them out thoroughly.
- For prospects, we must have at least a ninety-day contact period in which we can attest to your character. A probationary period and productivity report will be given.
- Outsiders need no knowledge of what goes on or is said in our meetings.
- No racial exceptions whatsoever! All members must be 100 percent white!

Early on, Jake began to realize that his research position was unworkable, that he was stuck. While the skinheads had let him into their subculture as a potential recruit, he could never fully enter their subculture or worldview. Their code of honor, which excluded minority groups, stood against his personal ethics. In an early portfolio reflection, Jake wrote, "I never hung out with them in public. I never went to an organizational meeting. I realized I was an outsider to this subculture."

Jake's negotiation experience was so dramatic that he was unable to gain full access, and so he was unable to collect the data he wanted. No matter how interested in and enthusiastic we are about a possible fieldsite, we must be conscious of our own comfort levels and even potential dangers in investigating certain groups or places.

Harvey DuMarce, another of our students, experienced difficulty negotiating entry into a fieldsite owing mainly to his own assumption that it would be easy for him to do so. He is a Native American, a Sioux, who wanted to research a gambling casino on another tribe's reservation. Because of his heritage, he assumed that he would be welcomed. But he wasn't. He had enormous difficulty finding people who were willing to talk to him, and he never really knew whether it was because of his Sioux background or because he was perceived as a student. Eventually, he had a conversation with the woman who ran the gift shop at the casino, and she introduced him to others. As his informant, she helped him gain an insider status in a place where he had assumed he already had it.

Any fieldsite you enter requires that you be conscious of your own personal assumptions and how they reflect your ethics, but you must also be respectful of the people whose lives you are watching. It is common courtesy for researchers

to acknowledge time spent with informants with gestures as small as writing thank-you notes or as large as exchanging time (tutoring or babysitting, for example) or obtaining grant-funded stipends to pay them. As you work your way through the process of getting permission or “negotiating entry,” be sure to follow these guidelines:

- Explain your project clearly to the people you will study, and obtain the requisite permission from those in charge.
- Let your informants understand what part of the study you’ll share with them.
- Think about what you can give back to the fieldsite in exchange for your time there.

Some sites may require official documentation, as in the case of two of our students who collaborated on a study of a day-care center. The center required them to have an interview, submit a proposal describing their project, and sign a document attesting that they had reviewed all of the center’s rules and procedures. Entry might be simple, laborious, or even impossible. For this reason, don’t wait too long to make yourself visible to the insiders you study. One student we worked with spent over a month in the field observing a Disney store. When she attempted to get official permission to write about this store, however, she was denied entry and could not continue her project.

Once you finalize your site, you might want to check with your instructor to find out your university’s policy with respect to research on human subjects. For long-term projects, the university’s **human subjects review board** usually requires that you file a proposal and submit permission forms from your informants. They are called “**informed consent forms**,” and on page 142 we present a sample of one of our own forms as a model. Universities usually have less formal procedures for the kind of short-term fieldwork that you might do for a one-semester course, and often have no requirements for filing permissions. Fieldworkers, no matter what size their projects, are ethically responsible for accurately showing the voices of their informants on the page. We feel strongly that you should receive permission from all the informants whose work you audio or video record as well as from any official person at your fieldsite.

The Ethics of Fieldwork: A Brief History

Whether you’re conducting a long-term project with formal permission or a classroom-based study with a short informed consent from each informant, it’s important to understand a bit of the history of human subjects’ review for research. While institutions’ rules differ, the reason for their protective policy never changes, at least for research conducted in the United States. In 1974, the National Research Act established the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research. Members of the

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I give my permission to Mary Smith to use my written and spoken words in her ~~research~~ project written for "Composition/English 102" at State University. I understand that I may read and approve the final draft of the material she uses about me in her project.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

Address: _____

Telephone number: _____

I prefer to use this pseudonym: _____

Informed consent form.

Commission came from diverse disciplines including medicine, law, religion, and bioethics, and their job was to identify the basic ethical principles that should underlie research with human subjects. Prior to this time, there had been far too many cases of research that harmed its subjects. In 1979, five years after their first meeting the Commission published what's commonly called "the Belmont Report," which identifies three basic principles relevant to the ethics of research involving human subjects:

1. **Respect for Persons** Informants should participate in research studies voluntarily and have enough information to make a decision about their participation. If you expect to interview a nurse, for example, and follow her throughout

her clinical day or even meet her at home, you would need to inform her of your plan and see if she is willing and available to give you that much of her time.

2. *Beneficence* Researchers should protect informants against risk from harm and also from the loss of any substantial benefit that might be gained from research. Let's say, for instance, you're working with a punk rock band that has fallen on hard times. You write an exciting essay about their ups and downs. You sell it to a magazine. In this instance, you are profiting from their story. As an ethical researcher, you should either share the profits or not sell the story.

3. *Justice* We need to select our informants fairly, without creating undue pressure, especially for people who already experience burdens. In this country, for example, in the 1940s, the Tuskegee syphilis study used disadvantaged, rural black men to study the untreated course of a disease that is by no means confined to that population.

These three principles from the Belmont Report cover the ethics of research in the United States in all disciplines across research communities. Whether you're working in a lab on stem-cell research, studying the behavior of penguins, working in a soup kitchen, or writing about a punk rock band, the basic ethics are the same—respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.