

Appendix I: Approved Informed Consent Procedures in Anthropological Research

Within the discipline of anthropology much has been written about the question of what constitutes Informed Consent. Informed consent is not considered sufficiently achieved through a piece of paper, but must be an ongoing process. The disciplinary ethical discussions have centered on the questions of what constitutes “informed” and what constitutes “consent”. Anthropological research takes place through the long-term embedding of the researcher within the communities that they study. The researchers build up trust with their research participants over time and in many cases they also build lifelong friendships, and are sometimes even viewed as extended family by the research participants. Often the goal of anthropological research is to become immersed enough into a culture, or group of people, that the researcher can develop an extensive and detailed understanding of how people in the group think, act, live their lives day in and day out, and how their lives are affected by specific social, political or economic dynamics.

This methodological approach means that often research does not have a clear starting moment and a clear ending moment. Trust with research participants has to be built before the research can really “start” and yet, if this trust is successfully built and members of the group consent to being a part of the research, the process of gaining trust retroactively becomes important data in the research project. Once trust is established, and consent for participation in the research is confirmed, the additional ethical concern arises that participants often share personal information with the researcher which they do not intend for publication. The question of consent therefore becomes an ongoing process. Rather than a yes/no consent process, in anthropological research, consent to participate in a research project cannot be taken to mean consent to share all information provided. The researcher has to use their best judgement, and if possible, communicate with the research participants, about which information can be shared and which cannot. Additionally, anthropological research often takes place in locations where, or with groups of people from whom, the notion of “research”, and especially the potential implications of being part of a research project, cannot be fully understood even when these are explained clearly and often. Some groups are not accustomed to the use of written documents (or if they are these have only ever been used by government officials, colonial powers, money lenders, etc leading to the wrong impression being made and the necessary trust being diminished) and some are largely illiterate. The question of hierarchical power dynamics between the researcher and the research participants should also be taken into consideration and, where possible, a certain degree of trust/familiarity should be established prior to requesting consent, so that the consent is freely given. Anthropological research does not always involve the maintaining of a full list of participants' names, which means that if written informed consent is used, it would create the only existing record of all research participant's real names and identities – potentially compromising their privacy and safety. Finally, in anthropological research individual consent is not always the best approach and anthropologists sometimes opt instead for forms of consent at the group level. Anthropologists therefore may first have to determine the appropriate level of informed consent (individual, group or both) that is required and design appropriate consent mechanisms. This requires a certain level of knowledge of the field that can only be gained through research. This raises two points that are relevant for discussions on Informed Consent:

1. As a relationship becomes personal as well as professional consent initially given may no longer refer to all information shared by the respondents and the researcher needs to assess this carefully.
2. Although prior informed consent is always sought and it may be possible in many studies, *meaningful* consent cannot always be fully achieved at the start of a research project since it may be unclear to the research participant what information will end up being shared with the researcher or what the implications of participation will be. In some settings, the researcher will need to do research in order to determine what the best consent procedure should be for the specific group of people participating in the research (the researcher needs to understand the local context well enough to know how the various consent procedures will be interpreted by the research participants and what the specific power dynamics are, in order to ensure the most appropriate form of consent) and as such this desired forms of *meaningful* consent cannot be taken as 'given' on day one of the study.

Against this backdrop of highly diverse research environments and populations, the most common practices for obtaining informed consent in anthropology are as follows:

Verbal Informed Consent

For all of the above reasons, the most common form of Informed Consent in anthropological research is verbal informed consent. This form of consent is standard practice and has decades of precedence and approval by Ethics Committees and Internal Review Boards, as well as the approval of large funders such as the European Research Council and the Netherlands Organisation of Scientific Research.

There are at least two forms of verbal informed consent used within anthropological research today:

1. Verbal Informed Consent with and information sheet written and printed. Here is an example of possible text for verbal consent forms (copied from University of California, Berkeley consent forms, by way of example): “**Confidentiality:** *Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used, unless you tick the relevant boxes below and sign this form granting me permission to use your name. **Retaining research records:** When the research is completed, I will save my notes for use in my future research. I will retain this study information indefinitely. The information will be kept locked away at my office or my home and any identifiable digital information will be encrypted. [This research is part of a larger research project in multiple countries and the results will be shared among the research team.] Carefully selected anonymised study information may also be shared for re-use in future research by other researchers.*”

A verbal informed consent information sheet can always become a written informed consent form if the research participants want their legal names to be used and should include all of the information normally included in a written informed consent form (name and affiliation of the researcher, topic of the research, duration and location of data storage, how data will be used and shared, whether there is any benefit to the research participants, possible risks, information about their rights to withdraw).

2. Verbal Informed Consent without information sheet, only verbal explanation

This consent is audio-recorded, during a formal interview for example. Most often it is done either when the researcher begins the research or when the researcher has established trust with the research participants and built enough preliminary knowledge of what consent might mean for them. Here also the research participants are told who is doing the research, what the research is about, what it means for them to participate, how the data will be used and stored, and any possible benefits or risks that participation might bring.

Written Informed Consent

When it is safe to do so, and when it has meaning for the research participants, sometimes written informed consent is used for certain aspects of a research project. When doing formal interviews or participant observation with research participants who insist on, or consent to, the use of their legal names, written informed consent should be used if at all possible. For some groups this written informed consent is used only once trust has been established as it can be associated with government, colonialism, and other forms of exploitation. For communities that commonly use and highly value such forms, they can be part of a trust building process – for example in research among medical or legal specialists. Anthropological research is a process that lasts weeks, months or years and in some cases the research participants may be asked to sign such forms only at a later stage in the research if this form of consent is deemed necessary (due to the nature of the data) or meaningful (due to the understanding gained of, or the relationship built with, the research participants).

Finally, anthropologists are trained to read body language carefully and to respect also non-verbal forms of non consent, and especially non-verbal withdrawal of consent. This is an important dimension precisely because verbal and written consent in anthropology cannot be granted in a simple way or at a single moment (in, say, the signing of a form) since a research participant might consent to having some of their activities and information probed, but not others. Or they might agree to participate in some aspects of the research but not others. Or they might want to withdraw participation briefly, but without the open confrontation of saying so.

Often all these forms of consent are used in conjunction within a single research project.