

Agar, Michael

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The Ethnographic Research Proposal

Now that different aspects of ethnographic research have been discussed, you are ready to write a grant application. First of all, the discussion of grant reviews in Chapter 3 should be reread. To repeat, that discussion describes only one review process for one federal agency. Other agencies or funding institutions will be somewhat the same and somewhat different. It is your job to find out the differences before you submit a proposal, and modify the application accordingly.

In this chapter I want to focus on the written application itself. Again, I will draw on my own experience as a review committee member, but I think many of the judgments will be reflected in other review panels as well. There are two key things to keep in mind. The first is that it is not likely that many of the reviewers will be ethnographers. If some are, you are luckier than most. The second thing to remember is that the research design itself is important, but many other things are evaluated as well. However, let us talk about the core of the proposal first—the research design.

As a former Jesuit student of mine put it, the trick in designing a research proposal for a review panel of hypothesis-testers is “to render the audience benevolent.” They will have questions generated by their particular biases to ask of any proposal. They will want to see some hypotheses, some operationally defined variables, a sampling design, and a specification of questionnaires and/or experimental procedures. It would be foolish of an

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ethnographer not to expect such questions. Because the panel has the power to award or refuse your proposal, this means that whatever your personal feelings on the matter, you must take them seriously.

At this point a little tact is in order. A few years ago a friend of mine, a survey sociologist, went to his first anthropology meeting. After a few days I asked him over a beer what he thought of anthropology. It is always interesting to ask newcomers to anthropology meetings what they think—experience often produces blind spots. After aggressively tossing down some beer and slamming the glass on the bar, he said, “You know, if one more person calls me a logical positivist I’m going to punch them in the nose.”

I have seen more than one ethnographic proposal come onto the table written in the tone experienced by my friend. I can only hope that the gratification felt by the author compensated for the hostile reaction that the proposal elicited. The thing to do is explain, without being patronizing, why the research is different. I know one should not have to, but right now, at least in my experience, hypothesis-testers cover the power spot. You should be able to give a reasonable argument, and reviewers, whatever their disciplinary biases, are usually reasonable people.

Another thing you can do is be more explicit about the informal fieldwork you plan to do. Some ethnographic proposals come in with a half-page of “methodology,” the standard litany of participant observation, informal interviews, and field notes. But most of the nonethnographic reviewers do not have the background knowledge to understand how ethnography gets done. A testing-oriented psychologist shared the review panel with me for three years. We had numerous arguments, but over the years gradually acquired some understanding and appreciation of the other’s point of view. Not too long ago he called me in as an ethnographic consultant on a follow-up study. He wanted to include an “ethnographic component” to get some information on the changes people saw as significant in their lives since the original study. The ethnographic component, he told me, was represented by a 1-hour open-ended interview.

An appropriate reaction by an ethnographer would be, “My God, I just say hello the first time I meet somebody new,” but that was the amount of time and money he was willing to invest. That was his conception of ethnography, and, in fairness, from his perspective it was a major “loosening up” of the research design. His view of ethnography is not that unusual, so when you write a proposal, you need to discuss the process of doing ethnography in detail. What do you do during all that time that the grant is paying your salary and those of your assistants? Why do you need transcribers? Why do you have such small samples? Do you not worry about sampling bias? How do you know what questions to ask? If you ask different people different questions, how do you compare the responses? You need to answer those

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questions by explaining what you are trying to accomplish by using an ethnographic perspective, and how a strict hypothesis-testing approach would be difficult or simply could not accomplish the same goals.

A second way to reassure such reviewers, if you agree with the “funnel” concept of ethnography, is to talk about the narrow end somewhat. The specific details of the more formal parts of the ethnography may not be specifiable because its form will partly depend on what you learn during the informal part. Yet, there are several things that can be discussed. First of all, you can give an idea of the general strategy you will use. Are you going to try to set up some kind of experimental design? Will you conduct a survey? Do you intend to systematically sample a number of events? These and other possible strategies raise questions that your informal work must address, so you can talk about the questions and how you plan to answer them. In other words, you can show how part of the informal ethnography will fill in some blanks to enable you to formally check some of the results.

Best of all, you might offer an idea of what the more formal work will look like, qualified by changes required by what you learn in the informal work. Then if you can go on to give one or two specific examples of how the formal design might change if you learned X or Y, you have done about all you can.

In the 4 years I reviewed grants for the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), perhaps three or four ethnographic proposals came through that followed this format in the research design. Without exception, these were followed this format in the research design. Without exception, these were grants the committee responded to favorably. Applications that just discussed informal ethnography were also sometimes approved, though usually there was more controversy and a higher likelihood of a low-priority score. There is no guarantee that this format will get you funded—there are a variety of other things to be discussed shortly—but based on my experience on one interdisciplinary review committee, your chances would be improved.¹

Besides, this discussion is not intended solely as a pragmatic guide to grant-getting. As discussed in Chapter 5, ethnography’s interaction with other disciplines is, I think, a good thing. It is forcing us to articulate our

¹ Pelto (1970) discusses several types of proposals that an anthropologist might submit, including straightforward tests of hypotheses based on earlier work. My argument for research design only applies to proposals emphasizing ethnography, as do most of Pelto’s types. My suggested format also allows for a common problem in ethnographic proposals: Because of proposal demands, the applicant commits himself to a model that he must later reject, in whole or in part, because of what he learns in informal ethnography. Moore (1973) discusses this problem, and Barrett (1976) is one good example of how commitment to an a priori model got in the way of ethnographic research. Freilich (1970a) also has a discussion of anthropological research proposals.

implicit premises and better document our experiences to address the skeptical outsider. Too much inbreeding, after all, increases the chances of lethal recessives.

Budget

As I was socialized into the world of grant reviews, I learned to read the budget pages like a short story. From the pages, you get a sense of the applicant's ability to conceptualize and organize the overall project. By comparing the budget with the design, you learn how carefully the proposal was prepared. And if the applicant is a rip-off artist, the numbers on the page will tell the story.

First of all, the overall cost obviously is important. In this current time of shrinking research funding, an application costing \$250,000 a year gives cause for thought. If there are four equally good applications on the table, one for \$250,000 ("250K" in reviewese), and three for \$80K, what would your vote be—especially if the money available for that round is, say \$400K?

If you want to do a project, and it is necessarily expensive, by all means apply for it. Some of the applications for the study of drug use in non-U.S. settings had high budgets, for example, because the applicant requested 100% support, and because the travel costs were high, so were the budgets. Nothing anyone could do about that.

On the other hand, I will never forget the reaction of an ethnographer at his first conference. The first day he listened quietly to the discussions of funding to the tune of "K's" in three digits. Later, over a beer, he said, "You know, I did my study with an NIMH small grant." A "small grant" then had an upper limit of one year at \$5000. His "study" is one of the best life histories around, and is one of the few social science works to be given a major review in *The New York Times*. I would love to see his next grant application. Knowing him, it will not be a rip-off, but it will, and should be, more generous in its support of his work.

In case you are curious about rip-offs, let me give you a hypothetical example. A grant comes in for a study with a high "indirect cost" rate (see Chapter 3). At the same time, the applicant requests rental space in a new building in a major city to the tune of more than \$1000 a month. What is wrong with this picture? First, a high indirect cost is not justified because the institution is not going to provide support for such needs as office space. Then, if you are doing a study of heroin addicts, a downtown prestigious high-rise is not exactly the best place to locate. Finally, the rest of the budget, from salaries to travel, reflects the same rip-off orientation. In the golden

days of the 1960s this was annoying and unethical at best; in a time of shortage, it is downright unfair to other applicants.

Another area of the budget to worry about is the staffing. In most grants, some of the staff are not supported full-time. One classic case of this is the "nominal PI" routine. Someone is listed on the grant as PI (principal investigator), but when you turn to the budget page she is only listed as available for working 10% of her time, for example, often at no cost.

The "nominal PI" might be the faculty supervisor of a graduate student's application. Or she might be a senior researcher lending her name and overall guidance to a project being conducted by new researchers. Or she might be the director of an agency who insists on getting some credit for the grant application even though she had little to do with it.

Using nominal PIs is a perfectly acceptable, and in many cases, helpful way to add some weight to an application. But other staffing patterns can suggest problems. Sometimes grants come in with three "heavies" listed for support at less than 25% time each. Then there might be a 50% time junior supervisor. Finally, you find some 100% positions among the interviewers. What you get, then, is a list of people who are spending a little time on the project, but no sense of someone who is spending most of their time supervising the project and ensuring that things get done as promised. Such a staffing pattern doesn't inspire much confidence among reviewers.

Another budget problem sometimes occurs when the project goes for 2 or 3 years. Occasionally, applications mindlessly extend the budget into years two and three without noticing that the research plan doesn't require the same people every year. Say the grant is a survey research proposal, with the first year spent collecting data and the second analyzing it. But the detailed first-year budget requests four interviewers, and then extends that amount into the second year. Unfortunately, no one is scheduled to interview that year. The result is a chink in the armor of competence on the part of the applicant.

The same thing happens with ethnographic grants. Suppose the applicant schedules 3 months for library work in another country where the research will be done, and then 1 month to select a site for the research. However, he also budgets a field assistant for the first year. The immediate review question that this generates is, "So what is the assistant doing during the first 4 months?" He may, in fact, have something important to do, but unless the applicant explains this, it looks careless.

A final word on the budget. Be sure and include everything you need, including a few hundred dollars for "miscellaneous" expenditures. Little things like postage and a telephone can add up. Then what about your

informants? Include something to compensate them for their time, either as an interview fee or perhaps as "gifts." If you are going to need some specialized help from someone for a couple of days, budget that as consulting. At a minimum, you can ask for \$100 per day plus expenses for a consultant.² If you request this, though, be sure you justify why you need the help of that particular person, and include their curriculum vitae.

To sum all this up, a budget is not something you put together just before you send in the application. It should reflect a coherent plan for doing the research, and it should blend harmoniously with the research design. When the reviewer reads the budget page, he is going to make a mental note of the staff organization. Then when he reads the research design, he will look to see if the people budgeted for are reflected in the actual research activities. It is not unusual for grants—including grants submitted by experienced researchers—to fail this test.

Staff

In every project there should be a person, or perhaps two, who is the core of the project. Reviewers will evaluate the appropriateness of that person to conduct the project. This is no time to be shy or humble. Let the reviewers know what your qualifications are. In most applications, you will include a curriculum vitae that will give your "official" credentials, but there are other things you can talk about as well.

If the proposal represents a continuation of some work you have done, show how the current application grows out of your past experience. If you have done a pilot study, be sure and discuss it in some detail. Pilot studies show that the applicant's research interests have at least a short history, and the pilot also shows enough interest to have gone out and done some preliminary exploring. For an ethnographic grant, it also demonstrates that contact with the group has been made. By the time you have trained the reviewers in the importance of the diffuse, symmetrical relationships you need with informants, it will reassure them to see that you are capable of establishing relationships with group members in the pilot study—or, perhaps, in previous work.

As much information as possible should be included about staff members. Again, a grant application is an attempt to convince a skeptical audience that

²\$100 per day? This book did come out awhile ago. The top federal rate for consultants, as of 1995, is \$250 per day, which is still low when you consider what middle-range psychiatrists and lawyers charge per hour. In fact, one of these days someone needs to write something about how universities are a major federal subsidy in providing cheap consulting. All the costs mentioned in this chapter need to be adjusted upward for fifteen years of inflation.

something interesting will be produced at the end of time and money spent. A major part of that general argument is a convincing display of people who can do the work. As many positions as possible should be specified with the actual people who will be hired, including a curriculum vitae for each one and a discussion of what skills they bring to the project. If you do not yet have specific people in mind, then at least describe the kind of people you will look for, and where they might be located.

The Research Context

The reviewers will look for the research support available to you because of your position in the institution through which you are applying. For example, you might talk here about colleagues who will be available to you as unofficial consultants to the project. Or perhaps equipment for your work—like tape recorders—is already available from the institution. If you are an academic, you may intend to incorporate some graduate students into the research, blending their support on the grant with their training role as advanced students.

For ethnographers, the research is often done outside the institution. In such cases, it is always good to have letters of support available from people connected with the group you intend to work with. If local support is going to be provided, like a connection with a university near the field site, this is also the place to talk about that.

In addition to the institutional contexts, you also need to specify the scholarly context in which you are working. To some extent, you do this when you talk about how the current application fits into your own research experience and personal interests. But it is also crucial to contextualize your research in the scholarly traditions represented in the literature.

The literature review can be a touchy thing. First of all, there will be the literature that represents your own training, and you, of course, discuss that to show how your proposed work represents a continuation and growth of that tradition. But you can safely bet that there will be other relevant literatures scattered throughout different academic disciplines, and in other sources as well. How, and when, do you draw the line? When have you done "enough" reviewing?

A colleague of mine at Houston and I were talking one day about the problem. He had just come from a meeting where a decision was being made about the computer abstracting services the library should subscribe to. It was not that long ago when a literature review involved using a few abstracts, checking a few journals and review volumes, and then sitting down at the typewriter with your note cards.

But now, with the explosion in fields and subfields, journals and volumes, the researcher needs more services that help organize all that information. As a result, there is now what appears to be an exponential growth in computer abstracting services. Our discussion concerned how the future training of researchers will not be like the training we received. Instead of teaching students about journals, we will need to teach them about different abstracting services and how to choose among them.³

So, after you organize your "home base" literature, go to the abstracting services, learn how they work, and use them. This will give you a map of the new territory you need to explore. Then by checking a couple of key items in each new bundle of literature, you will get some idea of which ones in particular have something to offer you. Finally, you can invest your energy in those areas and learn something in the process.

Before leaving this discussion, I should mention something about the egos of some review committee members. First of all, it is embarrassing, after you have been on the committee for a while, to note that your work is cited more frequently. Word gets out and some applicants feel that it cannot hurt to cite as many of the potential reviewers as possible. For almost all of the reviewers I have known, this makes no difference in their judgment. If it does, it is usually because an entire area was left out of the discussion that should have been there—an area in which they have also done work. There have been a couple of occasions when a reviewer got downright nasty toward an applicant when the reviewer's own work was not cited. I do not think applicants should find out about such people and cater to them, but you should know that a few of them are around. Fortunately, their impact on the overall committee is minimal because it's usually obvious what is going on.

More important is the problem of the different interests represented on an interdisciplinary review panel. Suppose that a social psychologist is on the panel. Almost all ethnographic research proposals deal with small groups, and there is a host of research in social psychology that deals with structure and process in small groups. If the ethnographer makes little or no reference to social psychology, as is often the case, what is the social psychologist to say?

Or take another example. A survey research proposal comes in intending to ask people about sensitive areas, or perhaps something like behavior that

³ Sixteen years later the information superhighway acquires new on- and off-ramps by the minute. Last year I ran a project where we used internet databases and discussion groups to forecast the potential role of a new drug to treat heroin addiction. The research was ethnographic to the core in its logic, but, obviously, something no one could have imagined when the original *Stranger* was written. Navigating the net is a critical new skill for all of us, though in this case the students may have to teach their instructors.

is illegal but has never been publicly reported before. One line in the research design talks of spending a few minutes to establish rapport. (See my own example of a survey, page 193, for what is, unfortunately, an excellent example of this kind of rhetoric.) What is an ethnographic reviewer to do with that? Scream? Bite his tongue?

In my own experience, sometimes such problems have generated arguments among the reviewers that hurt the applicant. At other times, the result was an interesting argument that resulted in a "communication" to the applicant to check out other literatures, with some specific suggestions. With the information explosion and the increase in subdisciplines, the problem will not disappear anytime soon. The obvious answer is for applicants to acquire as broad a perspective as possible on the human species, so that they can at least note other relevant areas that are beyond their competence to discuss in detail. Unfortunately, such breadth is difficult to obtain and probably not as well rewarded professionally as depth in a particular subfield.

Human Subjects

Some time was spent in Chapter 4 discussing the ethical issues of the protection of human subjects. Many funding agencies—all of the federal ones—now require human subjects' clearance from the applying institution, and then they give the application their own human subjects review just to be sure. During my experience on the review panel, these procedures changed over the 4 years, generally in the direction of being more thorough.

For example, the last time I participated, reviewers received a grant application with a required section discussing the protection of human subjects, plus a form filled out by the applicant detailing procedures to be used. Material from the applicant's institution certifying that a local review had been conducted was also included, together with a report on that review.

If this sounds like it is developing into a bureaucratic feeding frenzy, I agree with you. The intent behind all this is a good one, but the procedures are becoming an annoyance that may or may not have anything to do with ensuring that the intent is realized. But whatever your personal feelings, if you apply for a grant, you need to have human subjects clearance.

The key concepts underlying this protection seem to be informed consent and confidentiality. When you approach people to participate in the study, you must tell them what they are being asked to do and have them freely consent to do it. Then you must also ensure that individual identities are protected, by using code names, erasing tapes, and so on. One of the things that review committees always look for is a written statement of informed

consent. This is given to the informant for signature. The form is usually then cosigned and dated by the interviewer, or whoever gave the person the form.

Now, there are hundreds of problems here for ethnographers. Many were discussed in Chapter 4, so they will not be repeated here. There are other problems that any social scientist would have to deal with as well. For example, if minors are involved, how do you get parental consent, especially if the study is of some behavior of the minor that he or she does not want the parents to know about? Or what if it is an experiment in which you cannot tell the subject exactly what is going on because it would bias the results? Or what if the sample is drawn from an institution where it is questionable that the subject has any "choice"?

The end decision of a human subject's protection committee is a risk-benefit judgment, as discussed in Chapter 4. For most ethnographic studies, the problem will not be one of exposing informants to unnecessary risk—though this could happen—but rather, the problem is how to deal honestly with the human subjects review committee to satisfy them while not promising to do things that are absurd in the context of an ethnographic study.

Take the written informed consent form. Again, in Chapter 4, some situations were mentioned within which the use of such a form would be disruptive of the very relationship the ethnographer was trying to establish. "Here, before we can talk any further, sign this." That is like trying to do origami in a hurricane. And, of course, it assumes that informants are literate, which they sometimes are not.

On the other hand, an ethnographer would not object to the spirit of protecting human subjects—it is just that the *written* form can be a problem. In my experience on the review panel, some ethnographic proposals were approved on the basis of oral informed consent. Sometimes the ethnographer says she will tape-record the oral consent and save that part of the tape. Sometimes no such promise is made. In all cases, a sample statement is requested to see just what it is that she is going to say. This conjures up an image of the ethnographer whipping out a plastic card and reading the informant his rights, but never mind.

Other ethnographers devote some time to discussing how they are going to let people in the group know who they are and what they intend to do. I think this is a promising strategy, one that fits the general flow of ethnography, and one that has always been used anyway. You talk about how you explain yourself to group members, and then note that they talk about you to each other. You can mention that you will do this each time you meet someone new, until people begin saying things like, "Yeah, we know about you."

The problem with this strategy is that there is nothing in writing—a bureaucratic void exists. In my opinion, the best you can do is say that when you sit down to do an interview with somebody "officially," you will get written or oral tape-recorded informed consent. By the time you get around to sitting down over a tape recorder with somebody, the relationship is probably solid enough so that it can withstand the assault of formal informed consent. Besides, you can present it in ways that deformalize it, like, "Here's something you need to sign to prove I told you you don't have to talk to me."

Do not take any of this as a comment on the spirit of field ethics. The comment is on some of the procedures, or more generally on those to whom procedures are sacred, while the goals those procedures were intended to accomplish become irrelevant. As another ethnographer said, the only true test of ethics is if the ethnographer suffers when the informants suffer as a consequence of something he has done. What committee is going to guarantee that?

In addition, there is another human subject to worry about—yourself. What kind of situation are you putting yourself into, both in terms of the group studied and in terms of the people you're taking money from? There are several cases of hostile reactions on the part of group members to the reports produced by ethnographers after a study was completed. William F. Whyte, for example, shows how his key informant tried to discourage community discussion of his book because of potential embarrassment. He gives several examples of the reactions of individuals in the study after it was published. Jennifer James argues that research now must be more carefully done, because mistakes in an information-consuming complex society can have devastating consequences.

On the other hand, there are some cases of positive reactions as well. Anthony Paredes, for example, talks of how his oral history work was favorably received by members of an Indian tribe. They used it in political ways, and even developed with him some material for distribution in the wider non-Indian community. His article was followed by several commentaries, including a few from community members. One community member said, "He has opened the eyes of people not only around Atmore, but in other towns that the Indians are not as backward as some people thought them to be."⁴

Your problem as one who achieves insider status is to judge the extent to which reports from that privileged position to outsiders in fact represent a

⁴See Whyte (1955), James (1972), and Paredes (1976), Gallaher (1964), Becker (1964), and Vidich *et al.* (1964) discuss cases of group reactions to published ethnographies. Barnes (1967) offers some reasons why modern fieldwork presents new ethical problems that weren't as difficult in the old days of studying comparatively primitive isolated societies.

betrayal. I have had both good and bad experiences in this regard. Up to a point, I feel that group members should retain control of the information—but where is that point? In all my work with junkies, I never had problems. I would show them things I wrote, both to use their comments as additional data and also to ensure that I wasn't reporting things better left unsaid. As far as the responses I got went, junkies were generally pleased that someone besides an undercover cop was interested in what their life was like from their point of view. The undercover cop was the one person (who also happened to be the prime enemy) to whom I couldn't tell anything new anyway. He had to be a good ethnographer. He wasn't just concerned with publication and promotion; he wanted to stay alive.

On the other hand, compare this with a disastrous experience I had at a rural commune. The directors allowed me to do a pilot study if they could control the final product. I agreed. When I sent them the final report, they cut it in half, changed technical terms, and altered the analysis. Because I had agreed to this procedure, I submitted their version together with a letter outlining what had happened. In my opinion, the final version I had written carefully protected them, and their editing produced a product that I was embarrassed to be associated with. At some point the accountability for the final product is the ethnographer's alone. I won't ever make such an agreement again.

So you see the problem. Under what conditions do you distort, lie, or leave out information to protect group members, and at whose insistence? What if the mayor of a town hates the report and the people think it's great? When are you justified in reporting something that you know group members will dislike in the interests of some higher goal, like a personal commitment to your idea of social justice, or science, or whatever it might be that personally inspires you? Fortunately, I don't think the problem occurs that frequently. But it is one you should consider when discussing human subjects.

Another consideration, related to this first one, is to think about the uses to which your ethnography will be put. Earlier in the book I suggested you consider changing your research interests to respond to funding fashions, if you could integrate it into your interests, and if it was ethical. But remember the famous cases of Camelot and Thailand, where anthropologists were criticized for not carefully considering the contributions of their ethnographies to efforts to harm the very people studied.

Some years ago I went to a conference of ethnographers who worked with deviant U.S. groups. I arrived at what turned out to be a fancy resort hotel and went to my high-priced prepaid room. After walking into our elegant reception, I (and most of my colleagues) were wondering who was paying the extravagant bills and what they wanted. An ordinary academic con-

ference this obviously wasn't. But since no one had asked us to do anything but give papers—yet—we drank and talked and patiently waited for the pitch.

The first hint came the next day, when a previously unannounced "observer" from a federal law enforcement agency was introduced. No problem. We all welcomed the opportunity to be heard by representatives of such agencies. But then the second day he announced the deal. His agency would provide research money and, in return, all we had to do was to answer questions that came down the pipeline every month or so.

The sound of dropping jaws rivaled the waves breaking on the nearby beach. He left, angry, a few hours later, muttering something about how he could see why ethnographers didn't influence policy. Later in the evening several of the ethnographic participants were discussing the day. A few of the participants argued that as long as they could define the research and control the product, why not take money from any source. Another argument was that if the researcher was in control, it could be important to do research in connection with an enforcement agency to try to influence policy.

I think those are reasonable arguments, but I would be uncomfortable taking money from an agency whose goal is the elimination of my informants. Others would define that as self-indulgent ideology and point out that in taking money from treatment programs I was doing the same thing. At any rate, in this case the argument was academic because no one was about to consider the offer as presented, with an unknown number of informational strings attached.

The dilemma is similar to that found in some of the arguments over the Thailand case. Say an anthropologist participated in a meeting in Washington, D.C., knowing that "counterinsurgency" research was being considered in Thailand. He went hoping to influence people not to do the work. It turns out that they had already made up their mind. When the scandal broke out, the anthropologist was implicated. He was naive, the argument goes, in thinking that his association with the agency would have any effect.

Such cases are exemplars of the classic opposition between participating in an ongoing effort at some personal moral cost versus standing outside and working on alternatives that are consistent with one's personal values. Such choices are usually so complex, and so involved with the participant's personal equations, that I have difficulty thinking of absolute guidelines. When confronted with such ambiguous situations, I first try to evaluate the potential political effect of my participation and its importance to me. Then I try to estimate realistically how much I have to "sell out" to participate. Then I decide to live with the consequences. I realize that that description of the dilemma is no answer, but it will hopefully help you think through the problems.

The issues surrounding the protection of human subjects and research ethics for ethnographers are complicated and still emergent. There are sometimes problems in the discussions of these issues. They occasionally generate more heat than light, and sometimes seem to reflect a megalomaniacal concept of the ethnographer's impact on the people studied and the sponsoring agency.

But other discussions are instructive in pointing out the kinds of problems ethnographers can stumble into.⁵ The grant applicant's problem is to ensure that the funding source is not setting conditions on the research that are unethical. Then, when dealing with the group members as informants, the ethnographer must ensure that they know what he intends to do with the material they give him, that he protects them from identification as best as he can, and leaves them control over the information that they personally provide. Finally, when writing research reports, he must be prepared to be held accountable for the contents, both by members of the group studied and by "outsiders" who might change their mode of dealing with the group on the basis of what he has communicated.

After 11 years in the drug field, where ethical double-binds are not an unusual event, I feel that I should have something profound and definitive to say. But all I see is a list of unresolved issues, made more confusing when I often see the value in different sides of an argument. The only definitive statement I can make is to hope that this discussion alerts you to some of the issues to worry about as you locate a funding agency, fill out the human subjects forms, and conduct your research. After that, you must make the choices.⁶

⁵For a list of references on ethics in anthropology, see Notes 15, 16, and 17 in Chapter 4.

⁶By and large the strategic advice in this chapter still holds in 1996, including the unfortunate assumption that most review panels will have ideas of ethnography running from hostile to naive. What has changed is that the interest in ethnography has developed to the point where you can anticipate some open-minded readers, perhaps even an ethnographer or two as review panel members. My discontent at the gap between official discussions of ethics and the straightforward issue of treating people decently continues into the present.