

University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board

Guidance - PhotoVoice Projects

Some researchers use a method of qualitative data collection in which participants take photographs of some aspect(s) of their lives, environment, or community. The photographs are then used as a basis for group discussions and to elicit important qualitative information about the photographers' attitudes and beliefs. The degree of risk to subjects in such research depends, in part, on what is photographed. For example, this process may pose the risk of self-incrimination to subjects who photograph themselves taking part in certain activities.

From the perspective of the IRB, the "human subjects" in the research are the research participants who are taking the photographs and then presenting their interpretations in group or other data gathering sessions. If the photographers are minors, then written parental consent for their participation in the research is required, along with assent of the child participant.

Although the individuals whose photos are taken are not the subjects of the research, there may be legal requirements for obtaining permission for using their photographs. If the photographers take photos of other people, then written permission to take the photo and use it in the photovoice project should be obtained. If the person being photographed is a minor, then written permission to take the photo must be obtained from the child's parent or guardian. The permission should include information about how their photo will be used, and whether they will have the opportunity to view the photo before making a final decision about its use. If the photographs will be published or publicly displayed (such as at a professional meeting or community gathering), the written permission must include information specifically granting permission to publish and/or publicly display the pictures. Researchers must have a method to link the pictures with the signed permission forms.

Research proposals involving PhotoVoice should contain detailed information concerning the training that participants will receive about 1) the types of photographs that they should be taking (as well as the types of photos to be avoided), 2) the procedures they should follow when taking pictures of others, including obtaining signed permission, 3) instructions participants will be given concerning ethical considerations and respect for the privacy of others, and 4) instructions participants will receive concerning maintaining their own personal safety. In addition to the research protocol and consent documents, the investigator should provide the IRB with copies of the training materials provided to subjects, as well as the photo releases to be signed by those who are photographed.
