Gender and Alcohol in a College Bar

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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May 2001

Expected date of Graduation

May 5, 2001
Abstract

This paper is the result of exploring and practicing the methodologies that go into creating ethnography. This is a documentation of the process used from making a proposal to writing a short ethnography of college bar culture. I first set forth my project idea and guidelines in my proposal. That is followed by comments on the process of doing this. The next section is a short ethnography based on the data I collected while doing research. Next, I discuss and comment on the methods that I used in my research and the learning process. In the conclusion, I summarize my findings and the process I went through.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Paul Wohlt, my thesis advisor, for his help and knowledge with this project. I would also like to thank my informants for sharing part of their lives with me and the bar for allowing me to spend many hours in there observing and talking to people.

Project Proposal

Group

I have chosen to do a study on the culture of college bars and the people that frequent them. My main focus will be on the men and women who regularly spend time at these establishments, meaning they drink, socialize, or work at them frequently. The bar that my project will focus around will be a local Village bar and restaurant, a short distance from Ball State University’s campus. Most of the people that spend time at this bar are college students. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds including sorority and fraternity members, food and beverage employees, honor students, and
foreign students, to name a few. Members of this group are mostly between the ages of 21 and 27. I will try to interview as many people as possible and hope to have at least two key informants, one male and one female. I also hope to have an equal gender ratio with the people that I interview. This is important to get a full description of the culture. Informants will be obtained by volunteering and will be acquaintances of mine. Besides interviewing, I will also be doing participant-observation. The people that I observe will be patrons at the chosen bar and the people they interact with there.

Problem

The main thrust of this investigation is to explore the different roles, attitudes, and behaviors of men and women in the college bar setting. Initially, I want to draw a picture of who these people are that frequent the bar and what their motivation is. Then I want to investigate gender relationships and interactions as they are influenced by alcohol in this environment. This includes how they interact with members of the same and opposite sex and what are some taboos and norms. I want to explore the differences and similarities in male-male interaction, female-female interaction, and male-female interaction, as well as different perspectives on behavior and attitudes. I really want to find out how males and females behave differently, and why they behave differently. I am also asking the question, what are the cultural influences that determine these gender roles.

Method

My first step will be to develop specific questions that I want to investigate. Then I will begin to do research. I want to do a brief literature search for background before “going into the field”. In this I will be looking for the results of similar investigations,
ideas for questions, and psychological background on male-female interactions. This will give me a good starting point for my own data gathering.

My information will be gathered in two different ways, participant-observation and interviewing. Observable behavior that I will be focusing on will be body language, physical actions, the buying of drinks, and conversations. I have a list of interview topics that will help structure the first interview. Subsequent interviews will be designed to explore topics deeper and to answer questions brought up in previous interviews or in observations. I will have the most contact in structured and unstructured ways with key informants and be more informal with other informants.

Everyone that I talk with will be informed verbally that I am doing research and I will ask their permission to use things that they say, including quotes, anonymously. Some of the topics covered in interviews and observed may be private, sensitive, or illegal information; therefore, all data collected will be anonymous. No subjects’ names will be used in my report or the notes that I take to protect informant’s confidentiality. Those subjects that I will interview will be asked to sign an informed consent form (attached).

Significance

The social role of the college bar is often over looked and downplayed in society because of the negative association with alcohol consumption. However, this micro-culture has a profound influence in people’s lives and on the relationships that they form. I am hoping to show how the college bar environment influences people both negatively and positively, and how it reflects the larger society as a whole, especially in terms of
gender roles. I hope to give people a different way to look at the bar scene, greater knowledge of human behavior, and an appreciation for cultural influences.

Comments on Proposal

In writing this proposal I realized that there is a fine line between laying plans out so specifically that you limit yourself, and having so broad of a proposal that you have no focus. This is a hard thing to accomplish and I am assuming it just takes practice. Being able to go back and rework the proposal is helpful because you may intend to go one way with your topic, but you find out that there is not enough information or something else is more interesting. This can be both good and bad because there will always be other ideas coming up that you would like to explore, but if you did, nothing would ever be completed. Culture is such a dynamic, changing phenomenon that it is hard to capture just a moment of it. I think this is especially a problem with short-term research.

I had trouble deciding what the significance of this work was and how to make it sound valid. I think this would be easier if you were doing applied anthropology, but convincing people that research is important just for the general knowledge gained is a challenge. At this point, I also thought a lot about who I wanted my audience to be. If I was doing this for academia, the significance is much different then if it was for university administrators, or student's parents.

There is a lot to take into consideration when writing a proposal and I think part of it is attention to detail and informing whoever you are making the proposal to of what they want to know. I learned this when the Institutional Review Board could not accept my proposal without additional information. I had not taken into consideration the details that they would want to know and would find relevant.
Mini-ethnography

This study involved the patrons of a local restaurant and bar establishment that caters primarily to Ball State University students. Informants range in age from 21 to 25 and reported spending on average twenty-two hours a week in the bar. Those people who were observed are mostly in the same age range with a few being slightly older or younger. I had three key informants, one woman and two men, with whom I spent a great deal of time and had several interviews. There were ten people who I would call casual informants. I did not have formal interviews with these people but spent a lot of time with them and engaged in informal discussions about bar culture. Many other people participated in this study by being observed in the college bar setting. My key informants and a few of the other people with whom I had the most contact are employed at various bars in the area. This gives them an interesting perspective on the bar culture by being both a social and working participant in it. They were particularly helpful in that they could make sober observations of the culture while working, making them very knowledgeable on behavior in a college bar. My observations of people focused on regular patrons, who drank to the point of intoxication. The main thing I was looking at when doing observations was communication and interaction between individuals and groups.

Most people seemed to spend time in the bar for the social, relaxed atmosphere. People reported that they go to the bar because that is where they know people and feel the most comfortable. One informant described his motivation as, “Going to the bar is a good way to relax from all the pressures of college life. I fit in here. No matter when I
come in I know that I will know some one and have people to talk to. Its not the
drinking, although that helps, its the people and the socializing.”

The culture of a college bar differs depending on the night of the week. For the
purposes of this investigation I focused on Tuesday, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday
nights. These are the nights when the largest and most active crowds gather at the bar. In
general patrons start arriving at the bar around ten o’clock. Most have already started to
drink at home or at another bar before going out. When walking in the door the first thing
most people do is scan the room looking for familiar people. If friends or acquaintances
are seen, they are greeted. This greeting is dependent upon gender and the amount of
alcohol one has consumed. Women are most likely to greet both males and females with
a full hug or a wave depending on familiarity. Men will greet other men with a nod of the
head or a punch on the arm. Men will often greet women with a nod or wave, or a full or
one-armed hug.

Levels of social interaction changed throughout the night, which was apparent in
both physical and verbal interaction. I did a measure of physical interaction to see how it
progressed through out the night. I conducted observations every hour between 10:00 and
2:00. I used a five-point scale where a one was assigned to people who were interacting
standing more than a foot and a half apart or to people who leaned away from whoever
they were talking to. A two was given if the distance was less than a foot and a half or if
a seated person was leaning in. A three was given if the people were casually touching,
such as shoulders against each other. A four was given for stronger, more deliberate
touching, such as hugging or putting an arm around someone. Finally, a five was given
for kissing, nuzzling, or similar interaction.
Individual groups or couples were given a number and then I averaged those to get a number for the time of the night. At 10:00, the interaction rating was 1.88. This reflects the number of people at the bar, the loudness, and people’s attitudes. I found that as more people filled the bar the closer people got just to be able to hear each other. They were, however, comfortable with this closeness and did not shy away from it. At 11:00, it was 2.45. More people were leaning in for conversations and casual touching, even if they did not have to. At 12:00, it was 2.92. There was a change in the attitude of people shortly after 12:00. Interactions became much more physical, especially in an affectionate way. People started to kiss and nuzzle up to each other. At 1:00, it was 3.00 and social interaction reached its peak. At 2:00, it was 2.92, because those people who had had too much to drink began to leave and most of those were the people being very affectionate.

After saying hello to people, most groups try to find a place to sit. Women are more likely to sit at a table, whereas guys would rather sit at the bar. Mixed groups tend to sit at tables and couples usually try to sit at a table, especially in a booth. Men are more likely to go to the bar to order drinks and women are more likely to order from a server. Many guys feel pressured to order “manly drinks” whether they like them or not. One person told me that he hated beer, but his friends would make fun of him if he drank a “frou-frou” drink like a Cosmopolitan. Some girls have also experienced this pressure to drink harder alcohol from men. One woman told of asking a male friend to order her a Tequila Sunrise while she went to talk to someone. When she returned to her table there was a whiskey and coke waiting for her, because her friend felt she “needed to drink like a man, not a girl”.
The atmosphere in the bar changes dramatically as the night wears on and more and more alcohol is consumed. People become louder, more outgoing, and rowdier. People stand and move around more, mostly to talk to different people. People also become more physical. Women will often sit on laps and put their arms around other people, both male and female. Some men get violent, playfully and seriously, with other men. Rarely does this escalate to throwing punches, but often involves the puffing up of chests, tapping or pushing, play wrestling, and yelling. Men also become more forward with women, openly expressing affection or lust both verbally and physically. This often involves hugging, standing close, and holding hands.

One of the norms of this bar culture is the buying of drinks for other people. This gesture is used in many ways. Usually, people only buy drinks for people that they know. An exception to this is after men get into a disagreement, if they solve their differences they will buy each other a drink. A man will also occasionally buy a drink for a woman he does not know in hopes of starting a conversation. Many different things motivate a person for buying a drink for someone they know. One informant said that he and his friends always pay for each other’s drinks. This allows them to express their friendship without financial loss because they are confident that the other person will buy them a drink later. Women are less likely than men to buy drinks for other people. When they do it is usually to celebrate a special occasion, such as a birthday or graduation or because a friend is out of money. If someone buys a drink for you it is proper to talk to him or her at least for a brief period of time. The giving of drinks is part of what holds together the social network of the bar culture.
Often someone, usually a male, will buy a round of drinks or shots for a table. Much ceremony can surround this event. I observed one man buy five Irish Car Bombs for his table. This is a half pint of Guinness and a shot of Bailey’s and Kailua that is dropped into the glass and then chugged. When everyone had their shot in front of them they all stood up and the purchaser gave a short speech. Everyone dropped in their shots then hit the top of the glasses together, then the bottom of the glasses, and finally hit the table with the glass before drinking. When I asked why they went through the elaborate toast it was explained as simply being a tradition. It started with one fraternity and spread to everyone they drank with. Now this toast can be seen performed by many different groups of people who have no connection to the originators.

Doing shots sometimes becomes a competition. For example, the last one to finish his drink and set the glass down buys the next round or they try to see who can shoot whiskey or Bacardi 151 without a chaser. These competitions are mostly seen amongst the men, although women do participate. When they do, they are not punished if they lose or cannot keep up. There seems to be a belief that women can’t and shouldn’t drink as much as men. In most cases this is true, but men feel threatened by a woman that can drink as hard as they can.

Discussion of Methodology

The first step in conducting ethnographic research is to build a rapport with the people one wishes to study. Going in to this I though I had that taken care of and I was ahead of the game. I work at the bar where I conducted my study so I already knew many of the people I would be observing and talking to, and they knew me. This ended up not being the great advantage I thought it would be. People thought of me as their server and
when I tried to move in to a position of participating and questioning, people had a hard time letting me assume that role. It took a little time to distance myself from my job, but I did so successfully by working different hours than when the people I wanted to interview came in and by being more social when I was not working.

I approached this project with the idea in mind that I could make ethnography of my own culture fit the mold of traditional models. I was looking for kinship relationships, rituals, and exchange patterns. Using this approach was both a help and a hindrance. By bending classic anthropological definitions a little bit I found many of these things in bar culture. It was a good way to focus and categorize my findings resulting in data that made sense to me and that I could analyze. On the other hand, trying to make my inquiries fit with traditional ideas probably made me miss out on some information because it didn’t fit into a mold that I was tying to fill. I realized this shortly into my work and tried to overcome it, but in the back of my mind I was always thinking about traditional ethnography.

Another problem that I had was actually reworking my belief system. First, I had several preconceived notions about bar culture and I was looking to fulfill these stereotypes. I did not realize I was so ethnocentric, especially when it came to my own culture. Even after I was aware of this, it still influenced how I conducted my research, but not necessarily in a negative way. When I was aware of these stereotypes I became interested in seeing whether real life fit the ideal. For example, I had this idea, which I got from the media, that men often approach women with cheesy pick-up lines and offers to buy drinks. I discovered that although this does happen occasionally it is not by any means the norm.
Another belief that I have that I had to work around was that there are no absolutes in life or in culture. I am very aware that there are general rules and that there are always exceptions to these. My problem came with trying to discern the rules from the exceptions. I wondered how many people doing something does it take to make it a rule, but then I would think it is not the number that matters because sometimes the minority follow a cultural rule and the majority is the exception. When that happens does the exception become the rule? This was a paradoxical problem that I spent many nights pondering with the only result being further confusion.

When conducting my investigation I was interested in interpersonal interaction. My goal was to see how alcohol influenced the way people communicate. Unfortunately, I got distracted a lot from this focus. In the bar setting there are so many interesting things going on. I would start looking at interactions and would get interested in something I observed and how it related to something else that was totally off my topic. In some ways this was good because anthropology is holistic and I wanted to look at the whole picture and all the minute interactions. For a short-term project, though I knew I needed to stay focused because time constraints would not let me explore other areas too deeply.

The main way I planned to gather my information was though participant observation. I thought that this would work best because I was interested in how people interact, and often time people are unaware of their behavior and how it changes in different situations. This proved to a very good strategy for me to pursue. Observations occasionally supported information that I got in interviews, but mostly they disputed it. I presented these findings to some of my informants. Some of them thought that I must
have observed or interpreted what I saw in the wrong way, but most of them simply were unaware of their behavior. Participant-observation was a great way to double-check the information I gathered in interviews.

Participant-observation was also a good way to get information that people felt uncomfortable talking about. People that I interviewed felt an obligation to live up to some moral standard, at least in appearance if not action. One-night stands, picking up strangers, and excessive flirting was frowned upon by everyone. No one would admit that he or she did any of it or that anyone he or she knew well did. Through observation and then confrontation, I found that nearly everyone lied about this. At first, I was frustrated to find that people were lying to me, but then I realized that this was an excellent insight to the beliefs and workings of this culture.

Participant-observation also helped me to access information about men that I would not have been able to otherwise because I am a female. The only time that I really felt my gender held me back was with knowing what men do in the bathroom. I had always assumed that women go to the bathroom in packs and men go individually. On the contrary, I observed several groups of men, two or more, going to the bathroom together on numerous occasions. I really wanted to know what they did and what they talked about because it seemed to go against the expected norm, unfortunately I could never follow them in or get someone to open up to me about what happened in there. I thought of sending a male friend in to observe for me, but that felt unethical because no one would know they were being observed.

One mistake that I made in the sequence of my project was postponing my literary research towards the end of my project. When I did finally do it, I found a lot of
information that would have been helpful with deciding how to approach my project and good ideas about the types of questions to ask. I also learned about the Revised Interpersonal Adjective Scale developed by J. S. Wiggins in 1991, the Relationship Closeness Inventory by E. Berscheid, M. Snyder, and A. M. Omoto in 1989, the Sexual Experiences Survey developed by Koss and Oros in 1982, and the Alcohol Use Among Recipients of Unwanted Sexual Contact Analysis. These already tested tools could have been very helpful, but I was dealing with time constraints.

I did not think through how to do my measurement of social interaction very well. If I had it to do over, I would have made separate measurements and recordings of female-female interaction, male-male interaction, and male-female interaction. This would have given me data to compare how the two genders interact. By having my highest level of social interaction being kissing and nuzzling I excluded most same gender groups and couple from reaching that level even though they could have very intense social interaction. I missed out on the whole picture by containing my categories so tightly. I also realized too late that I have a bias that high social interaction would be between different genders and that it would be of a sexual nature.

Another difficulty that I had was keeping my focus. Many times I ended up participating more than I observed. When I first started I would make many good observations at the beginning of the night, but as it got later I would get so caught up in what was going on I would forget to make observations. This proved to be good and bad, as much of this experience has been. I learned a lot from being such a strong participant. I was afraid that I would forget a lot of things that happened or insights that I had, but when I sat down to start writing about my experiences everything came back. I now
understand how important and significant head notes are. They really are the true experience even though they are shaped by memory, which in some ways actually enhances and provides better insight.

I think my major downfall on this project was my lack of field notes. I did not take a lot, and they were not very detailed. This was because I stuck out like a sore thumb with my notebook and I felt this had a negative influence on the events occurring around me. When I had a notebook, even what I thought was a small, discrete one, people hesitated approach me and talk to me. They seemed to get the feeling that I was doing homework and should not be bothered. I did use a notebook sometimes because I felt I needed it to balance out and backup my head notes. This worked for this project but if I was ever to do something bigger and more in-depth where I would want to address the information periodically throughout my life, I would make detailed fieldnotes immediately after the experience. Now I understand how important and necessary field notes are.

Conclusion

Men and women do not interact as differently as I expected in the college bar setting, but they certainly do not interact the same. Both men and women have similar attitudes about going out to a bar. They want to have fun and socialize. Both drink to relax, escape problems, and have an excuse for atypical behavior. Alcohol and bars allow people to be what they cannot when they are sober or in a different environment. The bar is a center of social interaction that usually extends to other parts of their lives. Most people interact with the same group of people in and outside of the bar. Drinking and socializing at a bar affects other parts of people’s lives, such as school, work, and
relationships. People who frequent the bar regularly look down upon those who do not as being boring and anti-social.

Males and females differ in their expectations of going out. Both want to meet people, have a good time, and get drunk. For men the priorities go in order of getting drunk, meeting women, and then having a good time. They feel that if they are drunk they will be better able to approach a female. A man who was so drunk he could hardly stand approached me. He apologized for this and explained that he was unable to ask me out unless he was drunk. If a guy does hit on a woman, he is generally not looking for a relationship, but has in mind a hook-up and a casual friendship. Men are not necessarily looking for sex but they would not turn down the opportunity or hesitate to try for it. For men their good times come from being intoxicated in a comfortable atmosphere with lots of people.

Women’s priorities are different. They order their expectations as to have good time, meet people, and get drunk. When it comes to meeting people women are not just looking to meet men. They are generally not looking for a physical connection, but want to talk and socialize with someone, regardless of gender. Many women become more outgoing with alcohol consumption, but do not feel that they need it to approach people. Women, more than men, become physical with alcohol consumption, often leaning against people and hugging them. Many women said that they would not have sex with someone they met at the bar, but admit that alcohol influences their judgment and inhibitions.

To summarize, men and women have many of the same values and attitudes when it comes to going to the bar, but they differ in their behavior, expectations, and
motivations. Men are more driven by sex and alcohol, whereas women hold relationships and good times higher. There are many exceptions to these norms. The belief that men and women must behave and feel these ways is strongly influenced by media portrayals of college and bar life. A man approaching a girl in a bar and offering to buy her a drink is a cliché that is perpetuated in real life because society or the media says that this is the proper way to behave.

Methodologically, this was a trial and error learning experience. I tried different techniques, some worked and some did not. Participant-observation was the central method that I used, and I feel that it was the best way to gather information and was successful for the most part. It gave me a very personal experience of the culture and an understanding of it I would not have gotten from interviews or questionnaires. Through participant-observation, I was able to see the real culture, not the ideal or other people’s perceptions of it. This was very important for creating an honest piece of work.

My interviews were good practice for interacting with people, questioning, and listening. Interviewing is a definite skill that can only improve by practicing. My later interviews ran much smoother than the early ones and were more productive, but I still have a lot to learn. It is hard to phrase a question correctly to get a good answer with out being leading or limiting. I should have done some language research to help with the phrasing of questions and the use of slang by people I interviewed and myself. I needed a better understanding of how the language and culture play on each other.

If I could go back and do this over, I would change many things. I would have more time and a different focus. My investigation could have benefited greatly from the use of a questionnaire. It would have given me the chance to ask questions in a different manner
with the hope of getting more open, honest answers. It would also have given me some quantitative data with which to backup my observations and analysis. Overall, this was a very educational and beneficial undertaking.
Appendix
Works Consulted


Svenson, Lawrence W.; Jarvis, George K.; Campbell, Robert L., “Gender and age differences in the drinking behaviors of university students.” Psychological Reports, Aug. 1994; v75n1 (Pt. 2).


Interview Topics

1. Interviewee’s relationship status, i.e. single, dating, married, dating exclusively.

2. Amount of time spent in a bar.

3. How often and how much does the interviewee drink.

4. Why does the interviewee drink.

5. Who does the interview generally socialize with in and out of the bar setting.

6. Why does the interviewee socialize in a bar.

7. How does drinking affect work, school, and relationships.

8. What are the interviewee’s attitudes toward other people at the bar.

9. What are the interviewee’s attitudes toward people who do not go to the bars.

10. How does the interviewee relate to members of the opposite gender in the bar setting and outside of the bars.

11. How does the interviewee think the opposite gender relates to them in the bar setting and outside of the bars.

12. How does the interviewee relate to members of the same gender in the bar setting and outside of the bars.

13. How does the interviewee think the same gender relates to them in the bar setting and outside of the bars.

14. What are the interviewee’s attitudes toward meeting people, flirting, pickup lines, dating people, asking for phone numbers, clothing worn at bars, physical interaction, and sex.

15. Does the interviewee think that behavior and expectations in the bar setting are cultural constructs.

16. Does the interviewee go to the bar with ideas or goals for the night.

17. Is college bar behavior related to age and position in life.
Levels of social interaction changed throughout the night, which was apparent in both physical and verbal interaction. I did a measure of physical interaction to see how it progressed throughout the night. I conducted observations every hour between 10:00 and 2:00. I used a five-point scale where a one was assigned to people who were interacting standing more than a foot and a half apart or to people who leaned away from whoever they were talking to. A two was given if the distance was less than a foot and a half or if a seated person was leaning in. A three was given if the people were casually touching, such as shoulders against each other. A four was given for stronger, more deliberate touching, such as hugging or putting an arm around someone. Finally, a five was given for kissing, nuzzling, or similar interaction.

Individual groups or couples were given a number and then I averaged those to get a number for the time of the night. At 10:00, the interaction rating was 1.88. At 11:00, it was 2.45. At 12:00, it was 2.92. There was a change in the attitude of people shortly after 12:00. Interactions became much more physical, especially in an affectionate way. People started to kiss and nuzzle up to each other. At 1:00, it was 3.00 and social interaction reached its peak. At 2:00, it was 2.92.
Gender and Alcohol in a College Bar

The purpose of this project is to investigate gender relationships and interactions as they relate to alcohol and sex in a college bar setting. I want to explore the differences and similarities in interactions with men and other men, women and other women, and men and women together. I am looking at how alcohol and the social bar setting influence and shape these relationships. Observable behavior will be body language, physical actions, the buying of drinks, and conversations. I will be using interviews and participant-observation to collect data. All information gathered will be anonymous.

You would be needed for one on one meetings at your convenience for brief periods of time during the evening and late night hours of operation of a local bar and at another time outside of the bar setting over a six week period. Participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the study at any time without prejudice from the investigator. Your name will not be used in any presentation of the information gathered. Feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns.

For a copy of your rights as a research subject or if you have any questions about your rights contact: Ms. Sandra Smith at the Office of Academic Research and Sponsored Programs, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-1600, or the Chair of the IRB, Dr. Daniel Goffman, Dept. of History, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-8700.

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I, __________________________, agree to participate in the research project entitled “Gender and Alcohol in a College Bar”. I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered. I understand that I will receive a copy of this form to keep for future reference.

___________________________________________  ________________________________
Signature                                      Date

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The Institutional Review Board has recently approved your "Gender, Alcohol, and Sex in a College Bar" as revised as an expedited study. Such approval is in force from March 14, 2001 to June 5, 2001.

It is the responsibility of the P.I. and/or faculty supervisor to inform the IRB:

- when the project is completed, or
- if the project is to be extended beyond the approved end date,
- if the project is modified,
- if the project encounters problems,
- if the project is discontinued.

Any of the above notifications should be addressed in writing to the Institutional Review Board, c/o the Office of Academic Research & Sponsored Programs (2100 Riverside Avenue). Please reference the above identification number in any communication to the IRB regarding this project. Be sure to allow sufficient time for extended approvals.