

Handing IRB an Unloaded Gun

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The author's autoethnographic article was accepted for publication and then blocked by her Institutional Review Board (IRB). The overt reasons for the "denial of approval" differ from accounts given behind closed doors. By weaving experience, excerpts from her article, and the responses of others into a narrative, the author creates an ongoing performance ethnography that resists the "tacit norm of silence" regarding discussions of incest and student/teacher attraction. Framing autoethnography as a "breach" of the academic norms regarding scientific inquiry helps her make sense of how IRB as a committee used the resources at hand—the existing religious/political context, their identities, their formal roles, and the written rules they had before them—to coconstruct a narrative that rendered her manuscript unpublishable. It is the author's hope that this performance of resistance will help facilitate the creation of a safe, defined space (similar to that of oral history) for autoethnography to occur.

Keywords: *Institutional Review Board; autoethnography; ethnomethodology; performance ethnography*

A rag-doll floats buffeted by the ocean currents, her mouth sewn up, her limbs bound.

* * *

A woman sits curled up on her side in the corner of a padded cell, her arms bound around her body by a straight jacket. Duct tape slashes an X across her face where her mouth used to be.

* * *

According to Chilean mythology, the Imbunche (pronounced eem-boon-chai) is a mythical "creature whose bodily orifices have been sewn shut to

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prevent suspected evil from expressing itself. The creature, ironically, became known for its great prophecies after being silenced” (Roesch, 2006). In other Latin American versions of the myth, an imbunche is a baby, in a fetal position, bound up in rope (Robertson, 1999).

Imbunchar is the ritual ceremony whereby priests or male witches (brujos) steal newborns and bind them up or, in other versions, break or amputate body parts to somehow mark the future of the child. Tortured, with all of their orifices sealed up, these children are raised in a cave with no contact with the outside world. My article, *An Unloaded Gun: Negotiating the Boundaries of Identity, Incest, and Student/Teacher Relationships*, has been subjected to imbunchar. It has been bound up and silenced because the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Memphis ruled that it was unethical to publish it. It is my fear that my imbunche and others are silently prophesizing a future that faces autoethnography if we do not act quickly to define the situation for IRB and create a space where tales from a researcher’s lived experiences can be told.

* * *

On Saturday, July 7, 2003, at 10:16 a.m., Carolyn Ellis¹ wrote:

Dear Carol,

Let me give you my initial impression after a quick reading. . . . I think this is so frightening because it is written about the Carol now, not the Carol so much of the past. . . . Plus you are dealing with teacher/student stuff, which is sticky. And some might even see you—as you question yourself—in the role of potential abuser. You step into the role of his mother. So it is “risky business.”

No doubt we’ve all had feelings for students . . . so you tap into that. And you tap into the multiple realities of the stories we tell ourselves and live out. . . . Of course many don’t want to acknowledge or even be aware of those multiple stories so you make them very uncomfortable.

And you show very well how abuse lingers for people and continues to affect their lives, sometimes most of all when they seem to be doing fine. . . . Plus you take us into things like thinking about suicide and the reality of breakdowns. . . . Whew . . . a lot and very powerful.

The question is how much to tell and to whom. I think we need to talk about that probably on the phone or face. . . . I don’t have the answers . . . but they usually come in interaction.

* * *

On Saturday, October 18, 2003, at 05:52 p.m., Carol Rambo wrote:

Elizabeth,

The article is a 50ish page monster (attached) about how I fell apart when I got tenure. I don't know if you know my work using my experience with incest and having a mentally retarded mother or not, but that is my background. The article in question sort of documents my falling apart and almost (ALMOST) sort of, kind of, having an affair with a male student. It has been accepted at *Deviant Behavior*, with revisions. My chair has decided he needs to read it this weekend and he will get back to me. He is clearly scared.

. . . It is my hope to illustrate how sexual harassment happens for some and to cultivate compassion for harassers and understand them as people with undealt with issues who use their mentor role to try and get their needs met. There needs to be a mechanism to teach graduate student academics that their issues will come up in the mentoring role and that they are responsible to share their thoughts and feelings with colleagues so that they will not act on them. Likewise the academy needs to own that sexual attraction is natural and should not stigmatize a colleague who comes forward wanting help to do the right thing.

* * *

On Saturday, October 19, 2003, at 05:52 p.m., Elizabeth Wood¹ wrote:

Carol,

. . . I can't imagine your losing your job over this. I *can* understand how bureaucrats (like those who appear in the story after the Judicial business breaks open) would be fretting and worried. But so much of that is unnecessary. If they run the place, sure, your job is in jeopardy, but if the people who run the place have at least an ounce of sense, in terms of protecting academic freedom, speech, or even furthering human knowledge, they will see that there is so much more to be gained from this work and other work like it that they will have to stand aside and let the thing be released into the world . . .

. . . The greatest value in this piece for an academic audience, it seems to me, is the opportunity to begin recognizing themselves and their colleagues. . . . You have a long section at the end, spoken by the old avuncular man, that acknowledges how "un-unique" parts of this story are. That seems to me to be important enough to place at the beginning if you are going to draw readers in. (My fear, obviously, is that unsympathetic readers will immediately be turned off by the degree of openness, honesty, and rawness of the personal trauma to which you and Eric both give witness).

. . . I think the title is wrong. This is a very loaded gun. I understand the reference to the unloaded gun in the narrative, but the subtitle refers to issues

which are all loaded guns. Perhaps what your work is trying to do is to “unload” those guns?

* * *

I grip the cool lubricated metal of the Ruger’s gun barrel with my lips, not wanting to let it touch my tongue. The smell wafts up the back of my throat as I inhale, filling my nasal cavities with its oily pungency. I taste it anyway as I exhale the air over my tongue and turn the gun over in my mouth. With the gun upside down, I stare at both of my index fingers on the trigger and realize that to do the job right and not blow a hole in the back of my throat and neck, the tip will need to be situated up against the curve of the roof of my mouth. I slide the tip to the apex of the curve to get it just right. If I meant business, if I had guts, this gun would be loaded. I’m just playing.

Part of me says, “Get it loaded, then put it in your mouth! See what it feels like.”

I answer this part, sensibly, “I don’t really want to do this. I’m just experimenting with the feeling, sort of forcing myself to shit or get off the pot.”

“You need a loaded gun,” I insist. I eye the clip, spring-loaded with only nine bullets. My fingers are too raw from loading it to fit the last one in. My pulse pounds in my skull. My eyelids are pasted open against my eye sockets. Everything is accelerated and hyper-real. The bathroom light glares painfully as it bounces off the porcelain and chrome. The floor tiles are hard and cold against my body, and I smell water. The sensible part, the one who is not goading me on, wonders, “Is this how it goes with some suicides, is this the doorway? Do they answer that voice and keep upping the ante and just do it? But I’m okay, just experimenting so that maybe I’ll stop thinking about killing myself all the time. Maybe I can see once and for all I don’t really want to do it.”

The other voice, dissatisfied with my lack of courage, says, “But you don’t know anymore than you knew before, doing it this way. You need bullets in the gun to really get it.” (Rambo, 2003)

* * *

The narrative below was written based on notes taken immediately after a conversation with my departmental chair in October of 2003.

“I’m going to give it to you straight and be blunt. This manuscript should never see the light of day—ever. If it were mine, I’d bury it under the nearest rock—deep.” The departmental chair stabs the manuscript repeatedly with an index finger.

And later, “Think of it as a catharsis, you’ve written it, now just put it aside and move on.”

And later still, "If this were widely circulated it might harm your career, you might endanger your chances for promotion to full professor."

"Are you saying I should be ashamed?"

"No. But I do think it's an experience peculiar to you. There's no reason to write about this, nothing generalizable. No benefit to any one."

"Really? You didn't connect with anything you read at all?"

The head shakes no across the table from me.

And later, "You act as if sexual harassment were running rampant through the institution."

"You don't think so?"

The head shakes no, again, "Not the way you make it sound."

"But we've had three in our own . . ."

I am cut off with force, "Yes, but I took care of that."

We reminisce a minute about one situation we both were involved in "taking care of."

"Anyway, I can only advise you, I can't prevent you from publishing it. However, I think your manuscript needs to go by IRB, first. The way you portrayed, what did you call him, Eric, in the manuscript, is not very flattering.

* * *

— Original Message —

From: "Carol Rambo" crambo@midsouth.rr.com

Subject: IRB

I have read the website carefully. On page 12 in guidelines <http://www.people.memphis.edu/~irb/guidelines.doc>, I'd like to call your attention to their definition of research. I did not gather and analyze information in a systematic way. Mine is autoethnography. My article is not an IRB concern because it is not research by their definition. "Eric," is not a human subject that I systematically did something with.

* * *

— Original Message —

Subject: IRB

Hello Carol:

I respectfully disagree with you. Strongly so. I think you will have a hard time convincing a review board that an article centering on a human subject and written for an academic journal that is peer reviewed is not research. What is it, if not research? Of course, the ultimate word on all of this is the IRB, not me. But I strongly urge you to bring this whole matter to their attention prior to disseminating your work through a publication, conference, or other means. It is a serious matter.

. . . Carol, in my view this is not even close. And even if it were, I don't think it is good for your career (although this would be your choice), I think it poses possible harm to the other subject in the article (and maybe to others), and it reopens an unfortunate chapter in the department's history — one that I hope has been put behind us. Please put the whole situation before IRB.

* * *

Imbunchar

* * *

I am not offered a chair; there is none. I sit on the floor in the hall, outside the conference room, in a black jacket, skirt, hose, and heels, waiting my turn. A loud male voice booms, "Rambo? Rambo? Good God, what a name for this one." After mild laughter and a moment, the door opens and the committee asks me in.

* * *

Various colleagues have said: "Why did you show it to your chair?" "I'd have never put it by IRB," "I would never, ever have submitted it to the department chair for inspection; nor should it have gone to the IRB," and "You should have just done it and asked for forgiveness later."

I answer them: "Should I assume I have to be secretive regarding my manuscripts? Should I have to publish it "stealthily?" This attitude does not reflect the openness, honesty, and nonjudgmental acceptance I hope to promote regarding my topic.

And there is another reality. Because of my breakdown, I had not published anything since 2000. In 2003, I was desperate to tell my chair that, at last, I had landed one. At first, he was pleased. Three days later, he told me he was worried about the topic and insisted on reading the manuscript.

* * *

The University of Memphis IRB

To: Carol Rambo
Sociology

From: Chair, Institutional Review Board For the protection of Human Subjects

Subject: An Unloaded Gun: Negotiating the Boundaries of Identity, Incest, And Student/Teacher Relationships (H04-34)

Date: November 13, 2003

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects reviewed the above referenced project on November 13, 2003, and has denied approval.

Our concerns relate to the subject other than yourself described in the application. Since the student is also a survivor of incest and, as a result is most likely psychologically fragile, the board felt that the psychological risk to him should he discover the publication of the study is far too serious and outweighs whatever benefits may accrue from this study. We understand that the likelihood of his seeing this study is remote, however, even though that probability is small, the risk is enormous. Similarly, we would not approve of trying to obtain informed consent from the student for the same reasons.

Your description of the student as unstable, combined with being a survivor of incest, and the fact that you were in a student/teacher relationship with him simply precludes any consideration of informed consent or publication.

* * *

Sorrow floats.

* * *

— Original Message —

Subject: Dead in the water

That is too bad. I am sorry. I think it could have made a great contribution beyond even the content; having to do with the style of paper it represents. This morning I was talking to someone about your paper and they commented on how it fit into an emerging trend that merges personal experience or perspective with theory. I have seen several attempts at it but yours was the "most well done." Don't know what to tell you except that I'm sorry and deviant behavior's offer is still there. I do not understand why he cannot give his consent; victims of trauma testify in court, write books, appear on television!!!! There is no question that adults have this right-IF THAT IS THE ONLY ISSUE?

Craig Forsyth¹

* * *

I sit awkwardly at the table next to Stanley,² a friend on the IRB, sipping a glass of Merlot. Stanley finally says, "I'm so sorry it worked out this way

but there's more to it than you realize. You really need to talk to Fred.² Get with Fred, we take him seriously, he sits on that board for a reason. And we were worried about you, your physical safety. You don't understand what was at stake. We did it to protect you."

* * *

—— Original Message ——

Date: 04/04/04

Below is an excerpt from the minutes of the January IRB meeting. Please accept my apologies for not getting this to you in a timely manner.

Susie Hayes

Chair distributed copy of an email received from Dr. Rambo asking if it would be okay to publish her article if she did not include her name or the name of the University. The board decided that if the article is published in a scholarly journal and counts as a research publication, then she may not do it. *Motion was made and seconded that publishing this article as research is unethical and to not approve. Motion passed.*

* * *

—— Original Message ——

To: Carol Rambo

Sent: Thursday, April 15, 2004 4:17 PM

Subject: Re: IRB rejection

Carol: I am sorry to get back to you so slowly. . . . I did look your manuscript over at the time and concurred with the committee. I would be glad to talk to you about how you might camouflage it, but as it stands now you would be putting yourself in harms way.

-Fred-

* * *

"You're so full of piss and vinegar, I used to be too, when I was younger, but it's all different now. Too much at stake."

"That's not going to fly here at the University of Memphis, maybe at Berkley, or somewhere else in California, or New York, but not here. Memphis is the buckle of the Bible belt."

"Oh God, don't tell me you still believe in integrity and 'being open?' [Laughter]. I don't know how old you are or how long you've been here, but you better wake up, smell the coffee, and figure out how things really work around here. How long do you figure you can stay this naïve?"

"I don't give a tanker's damn . . . you know, I bet I'll regret saying this later, but I'll say it anyway. I don't give a tanker's damn about your human subject. This is all about liability. The University doesn't like lawsuits or anything that could tarnish its image."

"It's nice to have a crusade, but do you want to be a martyr for this? I don't, and you should ask yourself exactly why you would be willing to risk your job. That's right, your job. You need to look deeply at this; there's some questions you need to ask yourself about why you want to publish this so badly, why you are so invested in this."

"Don't think I'm willing to stick my neck out for you. I can't support you; can't take a stance. Had my own troubles round here and just one more thing, just one, and I'm history."

"I've been accused of sexual harassment twice, myself. They both lied, trying to blackmail me for a better grade. One was very uptight, a religious conservative, and she took things out of context . . ."

"No one gives a god damn about the truth, it's about liability."

"You can't publish that manuscript anywhere. I don't care if you submit it to *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Ladies Home Journal*, *Soldier of Fortune*, or *Field and Stream*, you can't publish that anywhere."

"If I thought bitch slapping you would bring you to your senses, I'd do it."

* * *

I scribble rapidly across my clipboard as Fred makes his remarks. I say, "I know a couple of scholars, Norm Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, who are collecting stories about these sorts of IRB decisions."

"Oh that'd be just great, really great."

* * *

—Original Message—

From: Carol Rambo [mailto:crambo@midsouth.rr.com]

Sent: Tuesday, May 25, 2004 11:38 PM

To: OHRP

Subject: Appeals process

To the Office of Human Research Protections:

I wrote a manuscript about an experience I had with a student which was accepted for publication in a scholarly journal. At the last minute, my chair thought it needed to go before our IRB. My IRB reviewed it and determined I could not publish the manuscript. I had to pull it from publication. Many people believe my IRB has misinterpreted what should happen with my manuscript. Some believe that because it is autoethnography and I did nothing

systematic with a subject, it should never have been submitted for IRB approval. Where do I get information regarding:

1. An appeals process, if, for instance, I think my IRB has made an honest error in their evaluation of my research.

2. Can I publish my article in a non-research oriented venue if my IRB has turned it down? One member told me in a private conversation it meant I could not publish it anywhere? Is he correct?

Sincerely,

Carol Rambo, Ph.D.

Associate Professor

——Original Message——

From: Elyse I. Summers, J.D. [mailto:ESummers@OSOPHS.DHHS.GOV]

Sent: June 3, 2004 9:55 AM

To: Carol Rambo

Subject: Appeals process

Dr. Rambo:

The issues you have identified appear to be largely between you and your institution.

That said, from what you have described it sounds as if it is possible that the activities in which you engaged did *not* constitute research involving a human subject if it did not involve “a systematic investigation, including research development, testing and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge. Activities which meet this definition constitute research for purposes of this policy, whether or not they are conducted or supported under a program which is considered research for other purposes. For example, some demonstration and service programs may include research activities.” 45 CFR 46.102(e).

As you have identified, for your purposes, the key determinations will turn on the interpretation of the terms “systematic” and “*designed* to contribute to generalizable knowledge” (emphasis added).

However, OHRP acknowledges that the regulations at 45 CFR 46 provide a floor, not a ceiling, in terms of human subject protection; it is within your institution’s authority to provide any additional restrictions in this area that it sees fit.

I hope this is helpful.

* * *

Colleague after colleague tells me, “You need a lawyer.”

* * *

Oh God! I can’t breathe.

* * *

Mother keens over her dead baby's body.
Sorrow floats,
dead in the water,
silent.
My Imbunche.

* * *

"Don't tell me to fucking shut up."

Something fleeting darts in and out of my consciousness.

"Fuck keening over dead babies' bodies." Shadow, my dark companion in the unpublished manuscript, demands attention. A dark ninja ballerina dances the dance of a whirling dervish, breathless, ecstatically angry, seeking revenge. I almost see her, almost grip her firmly to control her, but she slips away.

* * *

My colleague tells me I am naïve, that I need to be bitch slapped, that I am something to be laughed at because my name is Rambo and because I want to engage in open dialogue regarding how we can find ourselves in compromising situations with our students. I defy you old man. Just because you have given up hope, just because you are so jaded by the institution that you laugh at integrity, it does not give you the right to be abusive. I hope your heart can handle this.

* * *

Am I a fool to care about integrity?

* * *

I am so frustrated and hurt I don't give a rat's ass about integrity anymore.

* * *

I care deeply about integrity; that is why I am writing this story.

* * *

A performance ethnography (Denzin, 1997, 2003; Ellis, 2004) unfolds as I portray this set of events. This representation of handing IRB *An Unloaded Gun*, is a performance ethnography of resistance. The culture of the academy, this text, and performance collide, blurring distinctions between performance, representation, and ongoing reality. But what is it I am resisting?

My unpublishable autoethnography may be classified as a form of autobiography (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998) or as a “confessional tale” (Van Maanen, 1988) where the personal experiences of the researcher are made the central subject, or even as an “impressionist tale” (Van Maanen, 1988) where fiction is incorporated and exaggerations are deliberately made to emphasize a point. However we classify it, the bottom line is that my story is my own. As such, my autoethnography is an oral history and outside the purview of IRB control.

According to the American Historical Association (AHA), oral histories “are not designed to contribute to ‘generalizable knowledge’ that they are not subject to the requirements of the HHS regulations at 45 CFR part. 46 and, therefore, can be excluded from IRB review” (Townsend, 2004). Although the Health and Human Services regulations do not define what “generalizable knowledge” is, the American Historical Council finds it reasonable to assume that the “term does not simply mean knowledge that lends itself to generalizations, which characterizes every form of scholarly inquiry and human communication” (Townsend, 2004).

Describing the situation further, they state,

unlike researchers in the biomedical and behavioral sciences they do not reach for generalizable principles of historical or social development, nor do they seek underlying principles or laws of nature that have predictive value and can be applied to other circumstances for the purpose of controlling outcomes. Historians explain a particular past; they do not create general explanations about all that has happened in the past, nor do they predict the future. (Townsend, 2004)

Autoethnography is a postmodern method of producing an account of personal experience; a particular style of accounting for particular pasts from which readers *may* generalize. Autoethnographers do not claim to be scientists, producing knowledge of predictive value for the purposes of controlling outcomes. They seek, if anything, to defy and blur the boundaries between the arts and the social sciences. Autoethnography, as a postmodern reporting format (Rambo Ronai, 1995), does not speak to “capital T” truth but instead seeks to turn the gaze inward (as I did in my manuscript) and both deconstruct and reconstruct “small t,” local truths, which are understood to be paralogical in nature or conversations which generate ideas without necessarily resulting in consensus (Lyotard, 1979). Autoethnography is reflexive, personal, and emotional and often serves as cultural critique, posing more questions than it answers. It is a moment in an open, ongoing, dialogue with oneself and an audience.

In a letter to the AHA, Michael A. Carome, associate director of the Office for Human Research Protections, concurs with the idea that oral histories are exempt from IRB review. The AHA states that "it is essential that such an interpretation be made available to the many IRBs currently grappling with issues of human subject research" (Townsend, 2004). Meanwhile, my particular IRB will not acknowledge this interpretation.

On the face of it, these board members performed their identity by enacting a medicalized model of research that was conceived of to protect the interests of human subjects. They wrote their story and interpreted the rules in such a way as to suggest that the risks of publishing my manuscript outweighed the benefits. Behind closed doors, they were afraid of litigation and feared for my "safety," things that were not part of the expressed purpose of an IRB and thus were not performed publicly.

No one on campus outside of the Police and Judicial Affairs knew the identity of "Eric." All records of the incident are sealed in an envelope in the Judicial Affairs Office at the University of Memphis. The events represented in the manuscript occurred almost a decade ago. These facts, coupled with the reality that the chances of Eric picking up a copy of *Deviant Behavior* and recognizing himself as the fictionalized character in the manuscript were remote, serve as evidence that the IRB's joint, collective, action regarding my manuscript was "overkill."

As a result of their performance, I have been silenced. "Eric," who was not offered a choice to speak, was silenced also. Ultimately, the key determinations did not turn on the interpretation of the terms "systematic" and "designed to contribute to generalizable knowledge," as suggested by the Office of Human Research Protections. It turned on the interpretations of a nine-person committee trying to enact their identities as academics, located inside a system of evaluative discourse that does not match the contingencies of autoethnography nor ethnography in general. Eric and his safety are red herrings, side issues in this broader debate I have with my IRB.

Through constructionist theory, I have cultivated compassion for the IRB at the University of Memphis. Harold Garfinkel (1967) suggested that society functions through the collective observance of "tacit rules." He would send his students out to violate these tacit rules and watch what occurred around the "breach." If something was problematic, if it did not have a formula or recipe that informed participants how to act towards it, the business of social interaction came to a halt until the participants could figure out a set of responses to it. If I observe IRB's denial of approval to publish my autoethnography as a reaction to a breach of the tacit rules

regarding childhood sexual abuse, student-teacher relationships, and scientific writing formats, their seemingly senseless conduct becomes sensible.

Regarding childhood sexual abuse, there is a “tacit norm of silence” (Rambo, 2004). To speak about it in public is considered “rude” behavior that disrupts the flow of social interaction because most audiences do not know how to react to such a disclosure. Many adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse implicitly and explicitly understand this and choose to stay silent regarding their abuse. The IRB members, when faced with a discussion of incest, coupled with an exploration of student-teacher attraction, may have found themselves overwhelmed by the substance of my manuscript and not known how to react to the content.

In addition, without a set of rules regarding the treatment of ethnography and autoethnography, the committee was forced to “ad-hoc” meaning regarding the situation. Because autoethnography is uncharted territory with IRB members, they do not have a practiced stance nor a formal set of rules to evaluate it. Their fallback position was to formulate a response based on the existing conservative religious/political context, their individual identities, the formal roles they were being asked to enact, and the written rules they had before them. Based on these interpretive resources, flying-by-the-seats-of-their-pants, they wrote the narrative of Eric and me as untellable, thus reinforcing the tacit norm of silence. It is this tacit norm of silence I resist by writing this as performance ethnography.

An Unloaded Gun: Negotiating the Boundaries of Identity, Incest, and Student/Teacher Relationships is my story. The chair of the department at that time was wrong to ask me to submit it to IRB. My IRB was wrong to block its publication. My best recourse is to write this story and hope that we, as a community of scholars, can help our IRBs understand the rules and work together to create a safe, defined space where storytelling is permitted without the fear of censorship. The traditional form of scientific knowing is not the only way of knowing.

* * *

The gun was never loaded; bear that in mind.

* * *

Senseless. Grief. I can’t tell you how much this hurts. My Imbunche.

Notes

1. Permission has been granted by these individuals to share personal communications.
2. Fictional name.

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Carol Rambo is an associate professor of sociology at the University of Memphis. She co-edited *Everyday Sexism in the Third Millennium*, with Barb Zsembik and Joe Feagin (Routledge Press, 1997), and has published on topics such as exotic dancing, childhood sexual abuse, and mentally retarded parenting. She has published in journals such as *Deviant Behavior*, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Mental Retardation*, *Journal of Aging Studies*, and *Perspectives on Social Problems*. To learn more about her latest research interests, visit her Web site at www.carolrambo.com.