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# Exploring The Penn Face: Researching Student Mental Health at Penn

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*University of Pennsylvania*

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*Trigger Warning: Mental health, self-harm, suicide*

Introduction: Who's Afraid of the Penn Face?

**Student 1 (external):** "Hi, how are you?"

**Student 2 (external):** "Great, thanks! See you!"

**Student 1 (internal):** *Wow, they really have it all together – why don't I?*

**Student 2 (internal):** *I'm really struggling. I don't know what to do.*

**Student 3 (external):** "I'm SO stressed – I have 2 papers, a midterm, and an a capella show this weekend!"

**Student 4 (external):** "You think that's bad – I've got 2 midterms, a case study, and a conference – and I only got 2 hours of sleep last night."

It is perhaps inaccurate to say that all Penn undergraduate students have been involved in conversations following the above two types – that said, it is not inconceivable that these scripts repeat over and over around our campus. Issues of mental health are nothing new to college campuses, and to say that the present moment is unique is perhaps a stretch. Regardless, if the articles published in the *Daily Pennsylvanian*<sup>1</sup> are any indication, the University of Pennsylvania is experiencing a resurgence in interest of mental health, as evidenced by the formation and subsequent policy recommendations of a Mental Health Task Force, among other things.

In all this discourse about mental health among Penn's undergraduates, one term seems

1 See, for example: Ferguson, Bryn. "New Mental Health Policy Recommendations Engage Penn Faculty." *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. May 28, 2015. Accessed February 26, 2016. <http://www.thedp.com/article/2015/05/task-force-faculty-ambassadors>; Getsos, Alex. "CAPS Trains Students, Faculty to Care for Those around Them." *The Daily Pennsylvanian*. April 30, 2014. Accessed February 26, 2016. <http://www.thedp.com/article/2014/04/caps-trains-students-to-care-for-fellow-students-mental-health>.

to arise again and again: *The Penn Face*. According to one college-house sponsored event<sup>2</sup>, the Penn Face refers to the feeling that other individuals "are on top of it all, causing [students] to feel overwhelmed" when they realize their lives do not seem as effortlessly perfect. In the opening passage, I have demonstrated two sides of the Penn Face as I have experienced it anecdotally as a Penn undergraduate. On the left is perhaps the more classic example – two students in conversation, one exuding a sense of easy confidence and togetherness while secretly struggling to stay afloat. The other student, unaware of this internal struggle, only perceives the external façade, causing them to feel their comrade us breezing by. The right passage demonstrates the flip side – a sort of one-upping, or what I refer to somewhat jokingly as the misery Olympics. Both students likely feel overwhelmed and are seeking validation for their experiences, but are also in competition over whose situation is the more taxing, creating a vicious cycle of sorts.

This idea of the Penn Face is not unique – one only need refer to the Duckling Syndrome<sup>3</sup>, made famous by students at Stanford University, as evidence for the sentiment that this sort of masking behavior is spread across campuses. This project, therefore, does not endeavor to prove that the current mental health climate at Penn is unique or even special. Rather, it is an examination of *what exactly* students are thinking and feeling at present, in their own words, documented by a member of the undergraduate community. It is important to note that as of this writing, the data collection for this project is *ongoing* and by no means complete. What I here present, therefore, is less an formal data analysis and more of an exercise in thinking about how to create a project focused on the mental health of

2 Fisher Hassenfeld Staff. "Deconstructing the Penn Face." *Deconstructing the Penn Face*. November 26, 2014. Accessed February 26, 2016. <http://fh.house.upenn.edu/node/6672>.

3 Glickman, Adina. "The Duck Stops Here." *The Duck Stops Here*. October 4, 2015. Accessed February 26, 2016. <http://web.stanford.edu/dept/CTL/cgi-bin/academicsskillscoaching/why-does-the-duck-stop-here/>.

one's own community, during a time when mental health and wellness are hot-button topics. Without further ado, therefore, let us begin said examination.

### Position: Why Am I Here?

Before we can do any work with mental health on campus, I, as investigator and author, see it fit to discuss my own position with regard to this research. In brief: I am a member of the Penn undergraduate body as a senior in the College of Arts and Sciences studying Anthropology (Medical Anthropology and Global Health) and Religious Studies. In my time at Penn, I have been involved with several mental health and wellness groups, and this investment shapes and informs much of my current research. I have been a part of the Reach-A-Peer Helpline<sup>4</sup> as a Peer Counselor for the past three and half years, and have had three separate board positions (Vice President of Training, Director of Training, and President). Additionally, I have been a member of the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) Student Advisory Board<sup>5</sup> – both as a general body member and as a member of the executive board – for three years. Finally, the University of Pennsylvania recently launched a new initiative called *Thrive at Penn*<sup>6</sup> – a series of online modules designed to introduce students to health and wellness issues on Penn's campus. As someone involved with the mental health community, I was asked to speak about my experiences on film for distribution to the incoming freshmen, and later the student body at large.

It goes without saying, therefore, that I am not breaking new ground with this research. My motivations for research are drawn from things I have experienced and heard discussed in my various circles, both in and out of mental health/wellness groups. I first heard the term the Penn Face, for example, at a meeting with CAPS staff some years ago. This project, therefore, is not simply an intellectual pursuit of knowledge production; rather, it is the culmination of years

4 See more: <http://www.vpul.upenn.edu/rap-online/>

5 See more: <http://www.puhcweb.com/caps/>

6 See more: <https://secure.www.upenn.edu/nso/tap.html>

of experience and work, formalized via an IRB approved protocol. I seek to validate the experiences of myself and my peers, and to formally examine the current state of the school.

### Background: Why Are We Here?

In order to summarize the purpose of this project, I choose to quote from my IRB submission:

“The discourse surrounding mental health has proven to be both *varied and long lasting*, due to the vital importance of mental health on the student experience. It is imperative, therefore, to understand how the students themselves, particularly those who have been socialized to the Penn lifestyle, *discuss and present their own mental health when in public versus in private*, in order to understand what is happening at the University.” [Italics added by author for emphasis]

### Research Question

The formal question guiding this research is as follows:

What are the *social and cultural* factors that impact students' public and private presentations of *self with regard to mental health* at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn)?

### Goal and Specific Aims: What Am I Working For?

The goal of this research is to understand what differences there are, if any, in how students present their mental health and well being in a public versus private setting, as well as to understand how these differences are shaped by specific cultural and social factors at the University of Pennsylvania.

In particular, the goal of this project is broken down into three Specific Aims, which were used to guide and shape the study instrument:

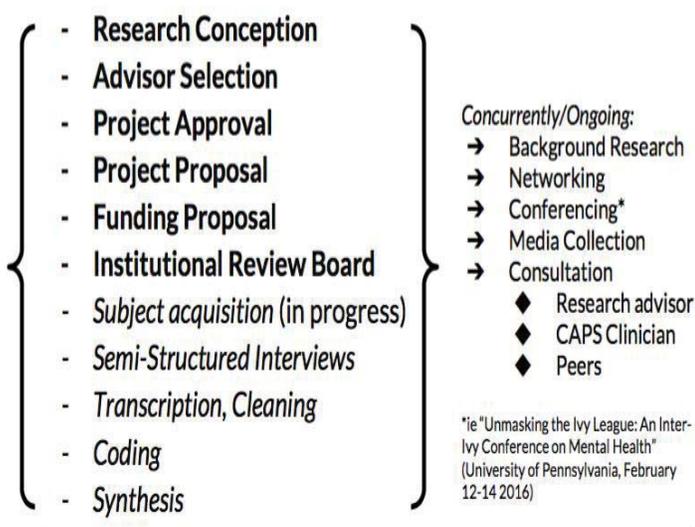
- 1) To understand students' attitudes in regard to their own mental health
- 2) To understand students' attitudes toward mental health in general

- 3) To understand how students' perceptions of mental health differ when presented publically versus privately

*NB: In regard to these specific aims, students refers to undergraduate students at the University of Pennsylvania who are at least 18 years of age and who have completed at least one full academic year at Penn.*

Process: Where to Begin? / Instruments

As with any human subjects research study, this project is beholden to an approved protocol in accordance with the stipulations of the Institutional Review Board at the University of Pennsylvania. The research process is long and multifaceted, as outlined below:



Currently, I am in the stage of Subject Acquisition and Semi-Structured Interviews. At the time of this writing, I have conducted seven Semi-Structured Interviews with undergraduate students. These interviews are the only mode of primary data collection I am using for this project will be these interviews, although I will be backing up and contextualizing my data via anthropological research from peer-reviewed journals.

The interview guide covers a wide array of topics. Importantly, it is first and foremost a *guide*, rather than a script<sup>7</sup>. The questions listed therein are oftentimes repetitive, as the idea is to get people talking rather than to acquire specific

<sup>7</sup> Please refer to Appendix A for the semi-structured interview guide (sans informed consent form).

answers. I am interested in experiences rather than specific answers, as I make clear during my initial introductory statements.

Considerations: "Have You Thought About...?"

Doing a research project centered on mental health involves a unique set of considerations. Obviously, the subject matter at hand can be incredibly sensitive, and it is important for the researcher to take appropriate precautions. The first step in this process is appropriately obtaining informed consent<sup>8</sup> and making sure that all the participants involved understand the subject matter and possible risks (personal distress, breach of confidentiality) of the project. This purpose is similar to the inclusion of the trigger warning expressed at the beginning of this paper – to ensure anybody involved with the research understands the project at hand. I also communicate to my participants that their participation is completely voluntary, and they will be justly compensated.

Outside the informed consent process, however, there are a multitude of other issues I needed to consider that were unique to a mental health research context<sup>9</sup>. First and foremost, I had to give careful thought and consideration to the language I would employ concerning mental health and suicide in particular. Furthermore, by undertaking this project I was assuming the risk that I could encounter a participant who would express suicidal thoughts to me in the course of the interview. This was the issue with which I was the most concerned, due in part to my backing as a peer counselor, but more broadly out of a human concern for the individuals with whom I am working. After consulting with some members of the CAPS Staff and my advisor, Dr. Frances Barg, I developed a sub-protocol should a situation arise where one of my participants expresses thoughts of self-harm, suicide, or intent to harm others. Should this situation arise – and, frankly, I

<sup>8</sup> Please refer to Appendix B for my Informed Consent Form

<sup>9</sup> At this point, it is important to make clear that this is an anthropological, rather an psychological, research study, and that I am by no means a trained mental health professional. My disciplinary backing influenced how I conceptualized and formed this research, as well as the constraints within which I was working.

hope it will not – I am charged with discontinuing the interview and stepping outside of the role of researcher in order to get my participant more direct and active help from a trained mental health professional.

Given that I am attempting to understand social and cultural factors at play, furthermore, I needed to be somewhat selective about my participants. I am only interested in working with individuals who have completed at least one full academic year at Penn, in order to get a sense of the effect of the ‘Penn culture’. This idea of a Penn culture raises questions about what it means to do a sort of ‘native anthropology’ – that is, a project pertinent to a community of which I am a part. As such, I have access to information that an outsider would not be privy to. This also begs a question about whether the very term Penn Face is emic or etic.

#### Where are we?

At this point, I have conducted seven semi-structured interviews. Ideally, I want to interview between 20 and 30 individuals, until I hit saturation in the answers I am receiving. I am not aiming to get a representative sample, as representativeness is neither appropriate nor attainable in this setting.

#### Conclusion: Goal

At present, I have not yet reached a conclusion for my research question. I have completed seven semi-structured interviews and have some significant data; however, I have not yet formally analyzed said data.

I am excited to continue data collection and learn more about the mental health climate at Penn. I return again to the goal of my research:

*The goal of this research is to understand what differences there are, if any, in how students present their mental health and well being in a **public versus private** setting, as well as **to understand how these differences are shaped by specific cultural and social factors** at the University of Pennsylvania.*

#### Acknowledgements

Dr. Frances Barg, *Department of Family Medicine and Community Health*

Dr. Meeta Kumar, *Director of Outreach, Counseling and Psychological Services*

Dr. Puneet Sahota, *MD/PhD Psychiatry and Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania*

Department of Anthropology (*Funding via Undergraduate Anthropology Research Fellowship*)

Student Participants

Student members of the Reach-A-Peer Helpline (RAPLine) and the Counseling and Psychological Services Student Advisory Board (CAPSAB)

#### Works Referenced

Fisher Hassenfeld Staff. “Deconstructing the Penn Face.” Deconstructing the Penn Face. November 26, 2014. Accessed February 26, 2016. <http://fh.house.upenn.edu/node/6672>.

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## Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Guide- Semi-Structured Interview Guide

I am conducting a research study about mental health here at Penn, about how people talk and think about mental health on campus and how that relates to their perceptions of their own mental health and wellness. Essentially, I'm trying to understand how various social and cultural factors here at Penn influence how people think about mental health, both in terms of their own well being and in terms of how mental health conversations play out in the public sphere. Since you are a member of the Penn community, I want to interview you to hear what you have to say about this topic. This conversation should last no more than one hour. I will only need to speak with you once for this research. This research will inform my senior thesis in the department of Medical Anthropology. I am going to ask you a series of questions and have a conversation with you about mental health on campus. I respect all of the information you are going to share with me. I do not need to record your name and your name will not be associated with your answers in any way. The only people who will have access to the information specifically from this interview will be my advisor Dr. Barg and me, and it will not be released to anyone except as required by law. For example, if you tell me that you intend to harm yourself or someone else, I am required to report that information to someone who can help you. If it is okay with you, I will record this interview on my phone so I can transcribe it later. Once I transcribe the interview, I will delete the recording. I will not save the recording of this interview. Please know that participation in this interview is voluntary. If you choose not to participate in this study there will be no negative consequences for you. You may choose at any time to discontinue participation in this study, also with no negative consequences. I will give you my contact information so you can get in touch with me at any time to ask me any questions you may have about my research, or to continue our conversation about mental health, related resources, etc. At the end of this interview, I will provide you with a packet about Penn and local resources

relevant to mental health and wellness. If you need to talk to someone urgently I can provide you with information relevant to your situation. a packet about Penn and local resources relevant to mental health and wellness. If you need to talk to someone urgently I can provide you with information relevant to your situation. Do you have any questions at this time? Will you participate in this study?

[wait for affirmation of consent]

Do I have your permission to record this interview? I will transcribe the interview when it is over and then I will delete the recording. I will not store the recording of this interview.

[wait for affirmation of consent]

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study! Your help is very important to my research. Remember you can stop participating in this study at any time.

[Are you comfortable in this setting? Is there somewhere more comfortable/more quiet that we can go to talk?]

### SECTION ONE: Interviewee Personal Background

- I. I'd like to start by learning a little bit about you.
  - a. What are you studying? / What school are you in?
  - b. Any interest in mental health / medicine / etc
  - c. How old are you?
  - d. What was it like where you grew up?
  - e. Gender Identity
  - f. Campus involvement
  - g. Mental health groups?
  - h. What made you want to participate in this study?

### SECTION TWO: Specific Aim #2 – Attitudes toward mental health in general

\*\*this section will be very free and conversation-

al

II. How are you liking Penn / how has your Penn experience been?

III. Let's talk about mental health in a general sense. What does the term mental health bring to mind?

a. How does mental health look at Penn? What does mental health mean here?

b. What parts of the Penn experience make discussions of mental health relevant?

IV. Can you describe the Penn environment in terms of mental health?

a. Probing for sources of stress, social and cultural factors relating to how people present mental health

V. *Contextualizing mental health/wellness conversation/s; Discussions of mental health*

a. Let's talk about a time when you were part of a conversation about mental health. Can you describe that scenario to me? Why did the conversation come up

b. What was the setting like?

c. What did you think of the conversation?

d. Were you comfortable in the conversation? Why/why not?

e. What did you hear in that conversation? Did anything stick out to you?

VI. *Contextualizing mental health at Penn*

a. Can you describe the Penn environment in terms of mental health?

i. *Probe for sources of stress, social and cultural factors relating to how people present and perform mental health*

b. Let's talk about mental health at Penn at large. How do you think this campus deals with issues of mental health?

c. What are some stereotypes on campus per-

taining to mental health/wellness?

d. Do you think perceptions of mental health are different at Penn than they are other places? What specific factors, in your experience, influence students' day-to-day mental health on campus?

e. Have you seen any articles in national publications (ex NYTimes) pertaining to mental health and wellness (especially here at Penn)? Any thoughts?

VII. Can you think about a friend or someone you know here at Penn who has struggled with issues relating to mental health? Without giving me specifics (please don't tell me their name), let's talk about what they struggled with and what you think about the situation

a. What was it like for you to see your friend in that situation?

b. What stuck out to you about your friend's experience?

c. In light of your friend's experience, what are your reflections on the Penn culture and mental health?

d. How do Penn students present themselves in terms of mental health? (probe for description of Penn students in relation to mental health / stress/ social and cultural factors)

VIII. Have you heard of the term 'Penn Face'?

a. If YES:

i. Discuss – in what context have you heard the term? What do you think of the term? How do you conceptualize it?

b. If NO:

i. Explain – masking mechanism

1. Is this something that sounds familiar?

IX. How could you discuss mental health with your peers? / Have you had this type of

discussion?

X. *Personal reflection on mental health*  
(Segue to S3)

- a. How often do you think about your own mental health? Do you 'check in with yourself'?
- b. Prior to this conversation, was mental health something you thought about in any concrete sense?
- c. How do you feel about your mental health as a member of a community – specifically the community at Penn?

SECTION THREE: Specific Aim #1 – Attitudes toward personal mental health

XI. Have you had any conversations about mental health recently?

XII. Many students experience struggles with mental health, particularly in college.

Have you had any sort of experiences with this?

XIII. How do you feel about your own mental health / wellness?

XIV. How do you handle mental health?

a. Notion of stress

XV. Is there anything specific to Penn that sheds light on how you conceptualize your own mental health and wellness?

SECTION FOUR: Miscellany / Wrap Up

XVI. Is there anything else you would like to add? XVII. What's on your mind?

XVIII. Hand out  
MENTAL HEALTH RE-  
SOURCE PACKET

a. Explain resources

THANK YOU!

**Appendix B: Informed Consent Form**

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**Title of the Research Study: The Penn Face: Deconstructing Mental Health at Penn**

**Protocol Number: 824462**

**Principal Investigator: (name, address, phone and email) - Dr. Frances Barg – 915 Blockley Hall, 423 Guardian Drive, Philadelphia PA 19104 – 215 746 4273 – bargf@uphs.upenn.edu**

**Co-investigator: (name, address, phone and email) - Antonia Diener – 4027 Walnut Street, Philadelphia PA 19104 – 570 972 7964 – antonia@sas.upenn.edu**

**Emergency Contact: (name, address, phone and email) - Dr. Frances Barg – 915 Blockley Hall, 423 Guardian Drive, Philadelphia PA 19104 – 215 746 4273 – bargf@uphs.upenn.edu**

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You are being asked to take part in a research study. This is not a form of treatment or therapy. It is not supposed to detect a disease or find something wrong. Your participation is voluntary which means you can choose whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate or not to participate there will be no loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Before you make a decision you will need to know the purpose of the study, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study and what you will have to do if decide to participate. The research team is going to talk with you about the study and give you this consent document to read. You do not have to make a decision now; you can take the consent document home and share it with friends, family doctor and family.

If you do not understand what you are reading, do not sign it. Please ask the researcher to explain anything you do not understand, including any language contained in this form. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a copy will be given to you. Keep this form, in

it you will find contact information and answers to questions about the study. You may ask to have this form read to you.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of the study is to learn more about the social and cultural factors that impact students' public and private presentations of self with regard to mental health at the University of Pennsylvania (Penn), which will inform a Senior Honors Thesis for the Department of Anthropology.

### **Why was I asked to participate in the study?**

You are being asked to join this study because you are a member of the undergraduate student body at the University of Pennsylvania who has been a member of the undergraduate community for at least one (1) full academic year. Furthermore, you have either responded to one of the recruiting advertisements or have been referred by another participant in the study. You have been selected for this study based on both your willingness for participation and since you represent a diverse student viewpoint.

### **How long will I be in the study? How many other people will be in this study?**

The study will take place over a period of 1 year. You will be asked to participate in only one session (this session), the length of which will likely not exceed one hour. There will ideally be a total of 20 participants involved in this research.

### **Where will the study take place?**

You will be asked to come to a quiet study room in Van Pelt Library, located at 3420 Walnut Street on a date and time chosen at your convenience.

### **What will I be asked to do?**

As part of this project, you will be asked to participate in a single, one-on-one guided conversation with Antonia Diener, a senior in the department of Anthropology. This conversation should not exceed one hour in length, and will be done at a time of your choosing. Conversations will be conducted in a reserved study room in Van Pelt Library (3420 Walnut Street). The content covered in this guided conversation will include your

personal attitudes towards mental health, general attitudes toward mental health, how public versus private notions and presentations of mental health differ, and the social and cultural factors at play at the University of Pennsylvania concerning students' mental health. Once this conversation is over, you will be compensated \$10 for your time, and nothing else will be required of you.

### **What are the risks?**

There are two potential risks associated with participation in this research:

- 1) **Personal distress** – given the content of these conversations, it is possible you will experience some emotional distress discussing mental health issues. The risk of distress is unlikely given the voluntary nature of this study; however, please know that you may discontinue your participation in this research at any time with no negative consequences. The interviewer is a trained peer counselor, and will be aware of any signals that require follow-up. Should you become intensely distressed during participation, the researcher may prematurely stop your participation. If you mention that you are planning harm to yourself or another person, the researcher is required to escort you to the emergency room so that you can connect with a trained mental health professional. The interviewer also has a list of resources available to students who experience emotional distress.
- 2) **Breach of confidentiality** – Through this process, it is possible that there will be a breach of confidentiality, meaning that information you have communicated in confidence is no longer confidential (ie your participation in this research is no longer confidential and content from your conversation will inadvertently be associated with identifying personal information). However, please know that the research team has taken several steps to prevent this. First, all information that you provide will be de-identified – your name will not be recorded in association with your conversation transcript, and your name will be

replaced with a code number. All identifying information (for yourself or others) will be removed. The document linking code numbers to participants' names will be stored in a locked file in a locked room in a security-guarded University building. Furthermore, this informed consent document, as well as the receipt you will receive for compensation confirmation, will likewise be kept separate from the data set and secured in a locked file in a locked room in a security-guarded University building.

### **How will I benefit from the study?**

There is no benefit to you. However, your participation could help us understand how students at the University of Pennsylvania think and talk about mental health, which can benefit you indirectly. In the future, this may help other people to understand students at the University, and shape policy interventions. The completed thesis will be given to the staff of Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) as a case-study to shape their understanding of current University of Pennsylvania students.

You will also receive \$10 monetary compensation for your participation. Additionally, you will also receive a packet containing information about campus and Philadelphia resources relevant to mental health and well being.

### **What other choices do I have?**

Your alternative to being in the study is to not be in the study.

### **What happens if I do not choose to join the research study?**

You may choose to join the study or you may choose not to join the study. Your participation is voluntary.

There is no penalty if you choose not to join the research study. You will lose no benefits or advantages that are now coming to you, or would come to you in the future. Your therapist, social worker, nurse, doctor or interviewer will not be upset with your decision.

If you are currently receiving services and you choose not to volunteer in the research study,

your services will continue.

### **When is the study over? Can I leave the study before it ends?**

The study is expected to end after all participants have completed all visits and all the information has been collected. Your participation ends at the completion of your interview.

You have the right to drop out of the research study at anytime during your participation. There is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you decide to do so. Withdrawal will not interfere with your future care.

If you no longer wish to be in the research study, please contact Antonia Diener, at 570 972 7964 or [antonia@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:antonia@sas.upenn.edu) and take the following steps:

- Explain you no longer want to participate in the study
- Receive confirmation you are no longer a part of the study

### **How will confidentiality be maintained and my privacy be protected?**

We will do our best to make sure that the personal information obtained during the

course of this research study will be kept private. While we will make every effort to safeguard your privacy, your personal information may be given out if required by law. If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be associated with any data that you provide. The research team will take every precaution to ensure your confidentiality will be maintained. The only people who will have access to study information will be Antonia Diener (who is conducting this research for her senior thesis in the department of Anthropology), Dr. Frances Barg (advisor), and the IRB at the University of Pennsylvania. All participants in this research will be de-identified. After this conversation, your transcript and associated documents (this informed consent form, the receipt from

compensation) will be given a unique code number to protect your identity. The document linking the code number to your identity will be stored in a locked file in a locked room in a security-guarded University building. Otherwise, your name and other identifying information will NOT be associated with your conversation transcript.

**Will I have to pay for anything?**

There are no costs associated with participating in this study.

**Will I be paid for being in this study?**

You will be compensated \$10 for participating in this study. You will receive this compensation upon completion of the guided conversation.

**Who can I call with questions, complaints or if I'm concerned about my rights as a research subject?**

If you have questions, concerns or complaints regarding your participation in this research study or if you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you should speak with Dr. Frances Barg, the Principal Investigator listed on page one of this form. If a member of the research team cannot be reached or you want to talk to someone other than those working on the study, you may contact the Office of Regulatory Affairs with any question, concerns or complaints at the University of Pennsylvania by calling (215) 898-2614.

When you sign this document, you are agreeing to take part in this research study. If you have any questions or there is something you do not understand, please ask. You will receive a copy of this consent document.

Signature of Subject

Print Name of Subject

Date