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Looking from the Outside/In: Re-thinking Research Ethics Review

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Abstract This paper shares my reflections on the research ethics review process, from the point of view of both a qualitative researcher and a member of an institutional research ethics review board. By considering research ethics review, first as *practice*, then as *policy*, as a *relationship* and, finally, as a *performance*, I attempt to outline a new vision of research ethics, one that engages seriously with the relationship between receiving ethics approval, and conducting ethical research.

Keywords Research ethics · Informed consent · Qualitative research · Research relationships

In Practice: Research Ethics "vs." Ethical Researchers

The initial idea for this paper was derived from a rather protracted and frustrating experience with receiving approval from the university's research ethics office for one of my department's major research projects. This project was conceptualized as a multi-pronged study that would highlight the various policies, pedagogies and practices that were being used to support academic and social equity at select schools within some of Toronto's most marginalized communities. The project served as a conceptual and theoretical "umbrella" for a series of smaller studies that would be conducted in each of the school sites; as such, each small study was designed with the overall questions, themes and goals of the larger study in mind. The only differences among them were the specific research question(s) to be asked, the specific participants to be involved, and the data collection methods to be employed (information about all of which was included in the original ethics submission). The idea was that such a multi-sited, yet conceptually-linked, study would provide unique insight into the complexities of teaching and learning for social justice in under-

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served urban communities, as well as generate further ideas and research about urban education across Canada.

My colleagues and I submitted the ethics protocol for this project in the Spring of 2007. It was our view that it should be considered one large study and, further, that it qualified for what was known as "expedited" ethics review, meaning that a decision from the research ethics office would be made in approximately 3–6 weeks. What followed, however, were several rounds of communication from the research ethics office to me and the project's Principal Investigator, which lasted nearly 6 months:

ROUND 1—July 2007

- The ethics office decides that our project is too complex for expedited review. They recommend it for full review, and suggest that each case study be submitted for its own ethical review. They also request more detailed methods, research questions, interview protocols, and consent documents for each case study.

ROUND 2—July 2007

- I seek clarification from the ethics office co-ordinator about whether each case study really needs to go through its own ethics review process, or if providing "enough details" will be sufficient. After several days of back-and-forth e-mails, it is made clear that we will submit one protocol for full review.

ROUND 3—October 2007

- I submit Version 2 of our project's ethics protocol, with a twenty-six-page cover letter, which consists of all the requested documentation for each case study, as well as all the other changes made.

ROUND 4—November 2007

- The ethics office decides that more detailed information about each case study is still needed. In particular, the overall project should have an Administrative Consent Letter that would be sent to the Principal of each school. Further, each individual case study requires separate recruitment strategies, in addition to their information and consent letters.

ROUND 5—December 2007

- I submit Version 3 of the project's ethics protocol, with a much shorter cover letter that outlines all the specific additions made. This protocol was submitted for expedited review.

ROUND 6—January 2008

- After a short e-mail inquiry, I learn that our project has received ethics approval from the university. The final reviewer's comments stated, "The researchers are to be commended for their work on this protocol. It is an enormously complex investigation, but the researchers have developed a model that works well for multi-study projects like this."

Needless to say, as "outsiders" to the review process, I, the Principal Investigator, and the other members of the research team were left with a decidedly critical view of the purpose and functioning of the institutional ethics review process. We were not convinced that the solution to reviewing a methodologically-complex study such as ours was to demand more administrative, contractually-based documentation; in short, to create more bureaucratic red tape for the researchers and our participants to navigate. We felt that the regulatory structure of the institutional ethics review process was an imperfect fit with qualitative research projects that took seriously their political obligations, because the former presupposed research studies that fit into more conventional theoretical and methodological moulds: moulds which the latter are deliberately designed to break. As the primary point of contact between the research team and the research ethics office, I was the most critical of our experience with receiving ethics approval, not least because the process contributed to a near-eighteen-month delay of our project.[1]

I share the above narrative to provide insight into my frame of mind when it came to the institutional research ethics review process, so that readers may understand why, in late 2008, when the Chair of my department asked me to be one of our representatives on the university's Research Ethics Board (REB), my immediate reaction was one of protest: I questioned my Chair's decision to approach me, someone who clearly had issues with the ethics review process. Upon further reflection, however, I realized that it was precisely because I had "issues" with this process, I should become a member of the REB. Since becoming an "insider", as it were, my perspective on research ethics review has changed … somewhat. I'm not nearly as critical of the process as I had been when I was outside it: I now understand that the REB's requests for more information and documentation were so that they could make a well-informed decision about our protocol, not so that they could contain and constrain our project to fit a research model with which they were more familiar—and, therefore, more comfortable. Moreover, I've come to realize that many of the questions asked by the REB are exactly the questions that researchers should be already asking of themselves: for example, is the nature of the intended research relationship to the participants is one of "power over" (e.g. teacher-student)?; are their intended methods supported by the project's rationale?; is community consent desired or required before the research can begin?; is participant compensation appropriate (e.g. if so, in what form(s)? If not, why not?). As I reflect on the experience of seeking ethics approval for our multi-sited study, however, I realized that what was troublesome to me—though I couldn't articulate it in this way at the time—was that I felt the research ethics office *wasn't* asking the kinds of questions that the research team should have already been asking of ourselves: the kinds of questions that would help us to frame ethically the decisions that, as critical, social justice-oriented researchers, we would have to make "in the field".

As such, there are still aspects of the ethics review process that I feel should be critiqued; especially if—as in Canada—it is to be considered an integral part of scholarly review, and not as a form of academic gate-keeping. For me, part of this critique entails considering how regulatory bodies[2] such as research ethics boards can create an unproductive tension[3] between receiving "ethics approval", and being an "ethical researcher" (see: Halse and Honey 2005; Nathan 2005). As Guta et al. (2010) note, "[e]ven researchers who have successfully navigated ethics review report feeling unprepared by reviews which failed to elucidate issues that later emerged" (pp. 35–36). This may be because, as Magda Lewis notes, REBs regularly confuse the difference between "ethics" as a noun (i.e. a process for "ethics" review), and "ethical" as an adjective (i.e. a research review process that is "ethical") (personal communication,

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[1] Upon receipt of ethics approval by the University, any research that is to be conducted in schools needs to undergo a review process by the district school board. In our case, this process took nearly another 6 months to be completed.

[2] It should be noted that Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement (TCPS) regarding ethical conduct for research involving humans is not a set of regulations but, rather, a set of guiding principles.

[3] As opposed to a productive tension that opens up new epistemological, methodological, etc. possibilities.

Saturday July 26th, 2008). Researchers do this as well, thereby sustaining an unhelpful dichotomy that doesn't support them in working through complex, real-world research ethics issues. Finally, as Cannella (2004) argues, most researchers rarely address the "… broader issues of […] ethics from within the modernist creation that is research" (p. 236):

> …the complexity and broad-based examination of regulation as not simply political and controlling but also as the product of complex, multivocal organizational structures and interactions that both exist and are created, that are purposeful and accidental, is not discussed (p. 236–237).

This leads to the application of a very narrow lens to the research that comes under REB review, particularly social justice-oriented qualitative research that is decidedly postmodernist in its philosophy, if not in its application. What follows, then, is a review of the common critiques that were levelled against the original 1997 policy document that sets the guidelines for the process of research ethics review in Canada; a discussion of the changes made to a new draft of the document in 2008, in response to those critiques; and then an exploration of the possibilities of the latest version of the document, which was released in 2010.

As Policy: Regulating Research

When the Interagency Panel on Research Ethics (PRE) first released the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS)* (PRE 1998), many Canadian researchers expressed concern (see: CAUT 1997; Amit 2000). The Canadian Association of University Teachers feared that applying one code of ethics to all types of research would "…lead to the application of a medical code of ethics to social science, environmental and humanities research…" (CAUT 1997, pages unknown), thereby only labeling as "ethical" social science and humanities research that fit within that code (cf. Lincoln and Tierney 2004). They were concerned that research ethics boards' (implicit) reliance on positivist understandings of informed consent, confidentiality, and knowledge dissemination (cf. Shea 2000; Tilley and Gormley 2007) would unnecessarily complicate the review process (cf. Brown 2007).

Concerns about positivism were also connected to the disturbing trend towards market-driven approaches to knowledge, research, and ethics within the university. According to Amit (2000), this trend would lead to the development of "…collaboration[s] between university researchers and 'partners' in the public and private sectors, a partnership which in turn sets the agenda for inquiry" (p. 218). Such an agenda often demanded scholarship that would provide "immediate economic, social, or commercial 'value' for money" (ibid.) and, further, according to Michael Apple (2005), has as one of its fundamental tenets the notion that "only that which is measurable is important" (p. 11). Indeed, this version of the TCPS defined research as "…a systematic investigation to establish facts, principles or generalizable knowledge" (PRE 1998, p. 1.1).

Finally, researchers expressed concerns with how the potential risks of a research project to its participant(s) is determined. Haggerty (2004) argued that the very notion of "risk" has a specific meaning, which is usually connected with "…actuarial science where statistics about previous events are used to analyze the likelihood of future untoward potentialities" (p. 402). Therefore, determinations of risk require at least "some consideration of empirical evidence about the likelihood of untoward events" (ibid.). He also argued that, in general, ethics review boards didn't engage in such empirical analyses when considering the potential risks of a given research proposal; nor did they require researchers to. Thus, REB decisions had the potential to be based on subjective, "hypothetical worst-case scenarios and then normalized across a vast range of research" (Haggerty 2004, p. 403).

Eleven years after the release of the TCPS, the Panel on Research Ethics drafted a second edition of the guidelines (PRE 2008), in response to the critiques mentioned above. At the end of 2008, the PRE embarked on a national consultation tour for the draft document, and created an e-mail account to which the public could submit their feedback.[4] In January 2009, I attended the PRE's consultation stop in Toronto, where I received my own draft copy of the second edition of the TCPS. To me, the first significant change was the inclusion of specific policy directions in the pre-existing chapter on research conducted in Aboriginal communities; the second important change was the addition of a chapter on conducting qualitative research. Both of these chapters were highly comprehensive and, given the concerns about positivism I outlined at the beginning of this paper, they were very welcome, indeed.

The third significant change involved the definition of research. As mentioned, the original understanding of research in the TCPS was that it was "…a systematic investigation to establish facts, principles or generalizable knowledge" (PRE 1998, p. 1.1). The draft TCPS definition of research was as follows: "… [it] is an undertaking intended to extend knowledge through a disciplined inquiry or systematic investigation" (PRE 2008, pp. 7–8). Finally, the core principles that formed the basis for the TCPS guidelines were reduced to three from eight. The original principles *were respect for human dignity*; *respect for free and informed consent*; *respect for vulnerable persons*; *respect for privacy and confidentiality*; *respect for justice and inclusiveness*; *balancing harms and benefits*; *minimizing harm*; and *maximizing benefit*. The new principles were as follows:

- *Concern for welfare*, which is broadly defined to include both a participant's individual well-being, and the well-being of her/his "…physical, social, economic and cultural environments…" (ibid.)
- *Respect for autonomy*, which allows individuals to make voluntary and informed decisions about whether or not to participate in a given research project
- *Respect for the equal moral status of all humans*, which accords all human beings the same level of respect and concern in the conduct of research.

It should be noted that the draft TCPS made it clear that these three principles were not absolute; nor did they apply to all types of research, in all instances. The nature and context of the research would determine which of these principles would apply, when, and how. I want to emphasize here that I am not against any of the research ethics principles I have just outlined, in either their original or draft versions. It is absolutely necessary for researchers to place participants' well-being at the centre of their work. What concerns me, however, is the way in which both sets of principles still supported a narrow conception of "research ethics". Cannella (2004) eloquently argues that

> [r]esearch is paradoxical, is self-contradictory, especially in the multitude of ways in which it has been approached philosophically, methodologically, practically, and as directly related to the construction of knowledge. […] [W]e know that ethics regarding other humans is probably the answer, but ethical perspectives are also complex […] So, our paradox becomes more contradictory, more confusing, more challenging (p. 238).

In my view, the TCPS guidelines did not fully acknowledge the paradoxical and contradictory nature of research, especially when it came to research practices that "often [blurred]

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the lines between research, advocacy, intervention and community development" (Guta et al. 2010, p. 35). As such, these guidelines failed to fully engage critical, qualitative researchers in an exploration of the ethical entanglements in which they would find themselves; the "'ethically important moments' that could not be foreseen in mere procedures" (Rossman and Rallis 2010, p. 381). In the rest of this paper, therefore, I explore the possibilities of the *current* version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (PRE 2010a) for opening up such an engagement by reinterpreting the nature, form and purpose of *informed consent*.[5] I have chosen to focus on this aspect of the ethics review process because, as Rossman and Rallis (2010) argue:

> Obtaining informed consent from participants—and the forms that police this procedure—has become emblematic of the codification and bureaucratization of moral reasoning and ethical practice. Sample informed consent letters are part and parcel of a review board's required procedures. In attempting to codify relational matters—that is, interactions with people—these letters ignore or do not consider the multiple ways of reading what appear to be straight-forward procedures (p. 381).

I do not believe that providing an alternative reading of these apparent "straight-forward procedures" will necessarily guarantee the production of "ethical" researchers any more than the current review process does; rather, I hope that reading *informed consent* in this way may better support researchers in working through the ethical dilemmas that are particular to their chosen form of inquiry.

In Relationship: Is Consent Always/Really Consensual?

As mentioned, the current version of the Tri-Council Policy Statement (generally known as "TCPS 2") was released in 2010 (PRE 2010a). Chapter 3 is entitled "The Consent Process" (PRE 2010b), and begins with a list of General Principles—further subdivided into Articles—that should guide this process. Of relevance to my argument here are Articles 3.2, 3.3, and 3.12. Article 3.2 is entitled "Consent Shall Be Informed", and states that "[r]esearchers shall provide to prospective participants, or authorized third parties, full disclosure of all information necessary for making an informed decision to participate in a research project" (PRE 2010b, p. 30). Article 3.3 is entitled "Consent Shall Be an Ongoing Process", and states that "[c]onsent shall be maintained throughout the research project. Researchers have an ongoing duty to provide participants with all information relevant to their ongoing consent to participate in the research" (PRE 2010b, p. 33). Finally, Article 3.12 is entitled "Consent Shall be Documented", and states that "[e]vidence of consent shall be contained either in a signed consent form or in documentation by the researcher of another appropriate means of consent" (PRE 2010b, p. 44).

Taken at face value, these three Articles provide a set of comprehensive guidelines for ensuring that consent to participate in a research project is obtained and secured in an ethical manner. As O'Connell Davidson (2008) argues, however,

> [i]n contemporary Western societies, the dominant conceptual framework used to define and understand consent is still powerfully shaped by a tradition of liberal political thought […] a tradition that imagines a sharp divide between public and private realms, and that accords a fundamental role to contract and *contractual relations* in the management of

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[5] Note that I will use the terms "free and informed consent" and "informed consent" interchangeably.

> our public and economic lives. In the public sphere, the individual subject is constructed as a 'sovereign' self, an autonomous being who, when provided with all the necessary and relevant information, is able to make a rational decision as to whether or not to consent to any given arrangement or contract (p. 61, my emphasis).

I have highlighted the phrase "contractual relations" in the above quotation because, while the TCPS 2 policies and guidelines for a free and informed consent process may not be contractual in *inten*t, solidifying the relationship between the research and the participants through the signing of a letter, or any other formalized act of agreement[6] is contractual in *effect*. This is especially significant given that, regardless of whether informed consent is obtained verbally, in writing or documented in some other appropriate manner, the relationship between language and power is often ignored.

For example, when Knight et al. (2004) first attempted to obtain the informed consent of Puerto Rican and Dominican parents/guardians in their ethnographic study of Black and Latino/a students' engagement with the college-going process (e.g. access to information, factors that influenced their choice of school, etc.), they found that very few families returned the consent form, despite the fact that the form had been vetted and approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researchers thus engaged in an exercise of what they termed "collective reflexivity" in order to deconstruct the form, and figure out why the return rate had been so low. In doing so, they came to realize that receiving approval from their institution did not automatically guarantee trust and accountability in the eyes of their research participants and their guardians:

> [a]s the university's regulating body with the power to approve or deny research endeavors [sic], conformity and adherence to IRB prescribed guidelines is ensured. This conformity creates a set of *cultural norms* that serves the interests and reflects the values of the IRB and the academy. Cultural norms are thereby nonevents when researchers fail to question the ways that power is diffused through their multiple manifestations, such as constructing consent forms (p. 397, my emphasis).

Thus, Knight et al. (2004) sought to "recognize and implement cultural relevance as an ethic of research" (p. 398), by collaborating with the Latino/a teachers and administrators who were also a part of the research project, to re-write the consent form in a such a way that both the local, cultural needs of the Latino/a community, and the distant, regulatory needs of their university, were met. Although their revised consent form was received much more favourably by the parents/guardians, the question still remains: to what, exactly, were they consenting?

Reflecting on her experiences with conducting a small ethnographic study of a (private) brothel in the UK, and subsequently developing a long-lasting friendship with the owner, O'Connell Davidson (2008) argues that, due to the ethics principles to which researchers must adhere when seeking potential participants' consent, they are expected to honour a participants' refusal: that is, "no" means "no". However, she then asks,

> …if someone does give informed consent to a lengthy period of participation in research that closely interrogates and then publicly disseminates the intimate details of her life, experience and emotions, should we accept that 'Yes' means 'Yes'? (p. 51).

Her conclusion is that, ultimately, we should not. This is because what the participant is consenting to is a research *process*, and not a research *product*; the former positions the

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[6] University of Toronto's ethics review form states explicitly that written consent may not be appropriate or required, and gives researchers the opportunity either to explain why this may be the case for their project, or to describe the form of consent that is appropriate for their project.

participant as a negotiated subject who has agency (often in ways the researcher can never know or anticipate; cf. Wong 1998), while the latter necessarily positions the participant as a fixed object and, therefore, has limited personal agency. That is,

> …even if researchers scrupulously follow [their institution's ethical] guidelines […] and treat consent as a process, the publication of the research of the research marks a definite end point. There is no going back to renegotiate what is now in print and so in the public domain. What was once an ongoing process of consent becomes […] a once-and-for-all prior event (pp. 59–61).

To me, this is an *ethical* dilemma of the highest order, which is not adequately addressed by current research *ethics* processes. Even if a university's guidelines for informed consent state that participants should be told of the researcher's intent to publish (as is the case at the University of Toronto), making participants aware of this doesn't change the fact that their ability to influence where, when and how they are represented in the public sphere is limited. In general, ethics guidelines do not require researchers to even consider such a dilemma, thereby masking the privileged position from which we do our work. As Fine et al. (2009) write,

> [f]or those imbibed in privilege, to know someone [e.g. a research participant] is to expect them to reveal themselves, to tell themselves, to give up their sovereignty, while at the same time, shielded by their privilege, never having to show their own blood stains, track marks, piling bills, or mismatched socks (p. 24).

O'Connell Davidson (2008) argues that a consensual research relationship between a researcher and her/his participant(s) should /feel caring, rather than contractual. Here, she is using "caring" as defined by Joan Tronto: it "implies some kind of on-going responsibility and commitment" (Tronto 1989, p. 173 cited in O'Connell Davidson 2008, p. 62). What, then, are the implications of this view of "informed consent" in the formal ethics review process for researchers, especially given that, in this alternative understanding of the construct, consent to participate is always and already incomplete? How might this be made explicit to participants? How might they be informed that what we *really* mean by "consent to participate" is, "…consent to an extremely intimate relationship within which they are, ultimately, to be used as objects" (O'Connell Davidson 2008, p. 65)?

As Performance: Trust as a Condition of Informed Consent

In my view, answers to these questions are a matter of trust. Therefore, researchers must think very critically and carefully about how we define "trust" and how we approach it in the context of the research project. Knight et al. (2004) write that

> [e]ngendering the trust and credibility of research participants and their communities requires that researchers attend to and respect the processes, beliefs, and values undergirding the ways trust is established in local cultural contexts. Monolithic and universal perceptions of trust, grounded in White, middle-class, patriarchal cultural norms, often ignore these processes rendering them as nonevents. These issues are punctuated when trust and credibility are being initiated through written representational texts of parent/guardian consent forms and there is no opportunity for mediation such as in face-to-face interactions (p. 401).

Indeed, as Helen Nicholson, a pre-eminent drama educator and researcher, writes, in drama work, "…trust is dependent on context, and is continually negotiated and renegotiated […]

as a *performative* act" (Nicholson 2002, p. 81, my emphasis). To me, this also applies to research, given that it, too, is dependent on context, and often requires continual negotiations between researchers and participants. Further, like drama, research is also performative, in that researcher and participant are specific roles that must be taken on during the research process. As Wong (1998) discovered when trying to obtain the informed consent of his research participants,

> [t]he (apparent) rapport that I had with the respondents seemed to unravel whenever I handed out the consent form. Many asked me, "What is this for?" I tried explaining the purpose of the informed consent […] Nevertheless, women simply signed the form as just another procedural matter. Many of them did not even read or look at the second portion of the consent form (p. 187).

Later, Wong felt betrayed once he realized that the friendship, intimacy, and even equality that he (thought he) shared with his participants were somewhat illusory, and that, in some cases, the women in his study were staging *performances* of "the consenting participant" in order to win his confidence and, significantly, the stipend he was offering as compensation for participation:

> This delusion of alliance placed me in a highly ambivalent situation in which betrayals can easily occur. In many ways, I *staged* my own betrayal and disappointments. I overanticipated and swallowed the women's receptiveness. I imposed my own assumptions about subjectivity when, in fact, I should have treated [the women] as complex beings. I should have realized that our relationships emerged from unequal power dynamics—me as their interlocutor and them as my respondents.
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> […]
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> In retrospect, I found that the *consent forms served as honest reminders of my own role*. It reminded me (momentarily) of my professional relationship with my respondents, who are complex subjects, and dispelled any notions of alliance and mutuality (p. 192, my emphasis).

While I don't fully agree with the idea of dispelling any notions of alliance and mutuality with research participants—rather, I think attention must be paid to the nature of the inevitable alliances and mutualities that are formed between researchers and their participants—the important question for researchers "in role", so to speak, is, "How do we 'perform' trust for the participants in our research project?" Further, what is the "… weight of the responsibility associated with that trust" (Fine et al. 2009, p. 25)?

Nicholson (2002) maintains that

> …in drama, relationships of trust are […] multilayered; drama not only requires participants to establish a network of trust with a number of participants, but also to find ways of working which demonstrate reciprocal respect for each others' physical, emotional and intellectual well-being. It follows, therefore, that if trust is recognised in practice it is because it can be identified through the public actions of the body—what participants say, how they act towards others, and how they relate to each other physically within the specific context of the drama itself (p. 83)

Once more, I find some useful parallels here for thinking about "trust" within the context of research and the ethics review process, especially the idea that it can be recognized through "public actions of the body". For instance, in the University of Toronto's ethics review form, there is a section where researchers must outline their consent process: that is, they must explain the steps they will take to fully inform potential participants about the nature of the research project, and of their involvement in it. In my experience as both a researcher and a reviewer, this section usually consists of a statement directing the reviewer to an appendix that contains the information letter (s) that will be distributed among the desired participant population(s). There is nothing inherently wrong with this; in fact, it is absolutely necessary that researchers let participants know what to expect from becoming involved in their project. My point is that this particular process of consent does not fully let participants know what they are agreeing to, for the reasons I've discussed above. In our consent documents, researchers could certainly inform potential participants that involvement in our study would mean that they would eventually be fixed in time and space as research objects, in perpetuity … however, it's doubtful that that we would have very much success with obtaining participants if we did that.

Therefore, what if research ethics review encouraged researchers to outline an ongoing "trust process", in addition to a consent process? That is, what if researchers were asked to outline those "public actions of the body" we would perform in order to earn participants' trust? What if we had to outline how we might mediate trust and credibility in face-to-face interactions with our research participants? This might help to create a productive tension between receiving ethics approval and being an ethical researcher: first, researchers would be attempting to articulate the ethical issues of their work as *they* understand them; and, second, researchers would then be able to inform their institutions' ethics review boards about those issues, thus making the review process *educative*, rather than regulatory. There is a difficulty, of course, in trying to formalize a process such as this. Gildersleeve (2010) reminds us that

> [T]he educator-as-fieldworker confronts kinesthetic, material, and discursive dangers that are less apparent to an untrained or careless eye. […] These moments are possibilities for dehumanization to take effect in the research process, yet IRB cannot prevent them. (p. 418)

Stutchbury and Fox (2009) have made an important contribution here, by developing a methodological framework for dealing with ethical situations that may arise in the course of research. Drawing from previous work on ethics by David Seedhouse and David Flinders, Stutchbury & Fox have generated a series of questions that researchers should use whenever they need to interrogate a particular situation during the course of their work. The questions are categorized according to which aspect of the research situation is being interrogated: for example, "cultural sensitivity", "fairness", "avoidance of harm", "reciprocity", "confirmation of findings", and so on. (Stutchbury and Fox 2009, pp. 495–496). My primary concerns with their approach, however, are that they do not problematize the Western philosophical foundation upon which their work is based (namely, moral theory), and they take as given the codes of practice (namely, the British Educational Research Association guidelines) to which they must adhere. This results in a framework that mostly consists of factual and close-ended, "yes-or-no" questions for researchers to answer, thereby leaving the nature of the *relationship* to their work and participants largely unchallenged. Yet, as Rallis (2010) points out, qualitative researchers, in particular, *start* with the relationship. Therefore, a useful point of departure for outlining our "trust process", in both the research ethics protocol and the informed consent process, could be to address the following questions:

- What is my relationship to this person in this context?
- How might this context change over the course of the research project?

- What would be the resultant change in my relationship—especially as related to issues of power—to/with my participant(s)?
- How, then, would I reinforce/reassure/reinstate the relationship of trust that I am developing with my participants?

Institutional research ethics review may not prevent the possibilities for dehumanization in the research process, but it can—and, in my view, *should*—foreground for researchers that they may be confronted by such possibilities, and ask them to make educated guesses about how these possibilities might be handled.

The implications of this for re-thinking *free and informed* consent in this way, especially for research that actively seeks to disrupt unequal distributions of power, are significant. Lewis (2008) maintains that research ethics boards need to distinguish research that "involves humans" in a clinical, bio-medical, or experimental sense, from "nonempirical inquiry with a focus on *critical analysis of social/political engagements in a human context*" (p. 693, my emphasis). I agree that this is a necessary first step, which needs to be formalized in both the policy and practice of institutional research ethics review. To be clear, I am not advocating for the creation of a false or arbitrary dichotomy between these two forms of research, not least because clinical, bio-medical, or experimental research is also "engaged in a human context". Rather, I am advocating for the research ethics review process to support researchers differently as they reflect on the ethical dilemmas, tensions and issues that are specific to the nature and context of the research they are conducting, by deliberately troubling their assumed understandings of "informed consent", instead of expecting them to twist, bend, and otherwise reshape their research such that it conforms to an a priori set of definitions. Of course, this still would not change the fact that participants would, ultimately, be objectified in the research product. If, however, researchers could *show* them that we have thought carefully and systematically about how we plan to earn and negotiate their trust for the duration of their involvement in our project, then I think that would go a long way in securing their consent to be objectified in a more permanent, yet meaningful—and, arguably, ethical—way.

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