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ETHICS IN/OF GEOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Beyond 'do no harm'? On the need for a dynamic approach to research ethics

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Abstract

Despite ongoing critical engagements with the remit and functioning of research ethics boards and review processes – not least in the limitations of transposing medico-scientific ethics approaches to the social sciences – the need for ethical practice in research is well established and accepted. Consequently, we see the ubiquitous requirement for academic social science research – whether by an undergraduate student, a PhD candidate, or an established professor – to undergo ethical review. Despite (or perhaps because of) this ubiquity in expectation, engagement with research ethics often remains perfunctory, formulaic, and procedural. Too often research ethics is reduced to a bureaucratic hurdle, a singular moment of approval that overlooks the dynamic, messy, and complex realities of the research journey. Moreover, this reductionist approach to research ethics is often replicated in teaching and training and reinforced as review duties are subsumed into the general administrative burden of academic life. How, then, might we move beyond the procedural and static to a substantive and dynamic research ethics process? Building on existing debates, we set out a number of possible strategies for realising this aim – not only in individual practice but linked to institutional processes in the set-up and management of ethics review, and opportunities for promoting the teaching of research ethics in a dynamic manner.

KEYWORDS

dynamic research ethics, reflexivity, teaching research ethics

1 | INTRODUCTION

Many social scientists criticise the functioning of research ethics boards and review processes for imposing medico-scientific ethics approaches and marginalising reflective practices (Wynn, 2017). While the maxim of 'do no harm' rightly remains the *modus operandi* of the ethics process, by focusing solely on this tenet ethical review processes often fall short of ensuring that research is experienced and understood as ethical (Hugman et al., 2011). Taking inspiration from previous calls for participatory ethics (e.g., Pain, 2008), we propose some possible strategies for moving towards a more dynamic, engaging, and inclusive ethics process.

2 | THE EMERGENCE OF RESEARCH ETHICS

Research ethics policies have continued to evolve in response to troubling moments in the history of research, beginning with the 1947 Nuremberg Code (Wynn, 2017), which established the core principles that underpin contemporary research ethics: respect for participants, preventing harm, safeguarding participants, and gaining informed, voluntary consent at the outset (Hall, 2009). Over subsequent decades, research ethics governance became increasingly codified as national research councils and governments responded to various scandals and malpractice (Hugman et al., 2011; Wynn, 2017). These histories illustrate the crucial importance of the tenet 'do no harm' to research ethics, but also the limits arising from historically contingent understandings of what 'harm' is and who is deemed 'worthy' of being protected from harm (Corbie-Smith, 1999; Mosby, 2013).

The codification of research ethics guidelines and review boards began with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and gained momentum in the USA, where concerns over Project Camelot[1] prompted the American Anthropological Association's Beals Report and development of a code of ethics in 1967 (Marcus & Lerman, 2018). This was followed by the 1978 Belmont Report – written in response to controversies arising from the Tuskegee Syphilis Study[2] – which developed a set of ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of biomedical and healthcare research (Marcus & Lerman, 2018; Martin, 2007). Codification of ethics reviews and guidance for human research followed in Australia (reviews in 1984, national code in 1999), Canada (initially in 1979 and 1987, and then consolidated in the Tri-Council Policy Statement of 1998), South Africa (for medical research in 1979, and then expanded in 2004), and across other national contexts (Davies, 2020; Karram Stephenson et al., 2020; Mosby, 2013; Wynn, 2017).

In 2005, the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Natural Environment Research Council (NERC) adopted policies requiring all funded projects to undergo ethical review (Dyer & Demeritt, 2009; Morris, 2015). These developments aligned with a wider strengthening of institutional-level research ethics governance in the UK, a move that was informed by the Alder Hey and Bristol Royal Infirmary scandals (McAreavey & Muir, 2011). Consequently, the role and scope of ethics review boards within British universities have expanded significantly, with researchers required to ensure their research is legal, consensual, confidential, and respectful – and the research must demonstrably fulfil these responsibilities (Horton, 2008, p. 367).

3 | CRITIQUES OF DOMINANT RESEARCH ETHICS APPROACHES

While there is general agreement about the importance of ethical norms (Morris, 2015), critiques remain that ethics review panels adopt uncritical positivist approaches, transpose bio-medical and quantitative-methods-based philosophies onto other disciplines and methodological approaches, and assume homogeneity in research contexts (Dyer & Demeritt, 2009; Karram Stephenson et al., 2020; Smith, 2012; Sultana, 2007; Tolich & Fitzgerald, 2006). Further criticisms include the continued dominance of Western worldviews and a lack of socio-cultural understanding, particularly for research involving indigenous communities or internationally funded projects (Davies, 2020; Smith, 2012). As Smith (2012) argues, this dominance of Western worldviews and exclusion of indigenous perspectives can result in unethical, extractive, and exploitative research practices.

Increasing levels of governance, bureaucracy, standardisation, and routinised quality assurance practices and accountability (Dyer & Demeritt, 2009; Morris, 2015) have resulted in universalised procedural ethics requirements that are becoming "more akin to a risk management exercise ... [rather than] adequately address[ing] the ethics needs of qualitative researchers" (Tolich & Fitzgerald, 2006, p. 73). Research ethics are thus often encountered as a hoop-jumping process to be tolerated, with researchers self-censoring and 'playing the game' by providing rehearsed, formulaic responses to what is seen as a bureaucratic, administrative box-ticking ritual (Allen & Israel, 2018; Haggerty, 2004; Martin, 2007; McAreavey & Muir, 2011; Pain, 2008; Whelan, 2018; Wynn, 2017). This results, as Tolich and Fitzgerald (2006, p. 73) argue, in a disconnect between the formalised and routinised ethical frameworks and the everyday, messy realities of the research process, wherein ethics are "a negotiation and dialogue, with and between participants" (Hall, 2009, p. 270; also Marcus & Lerman, 2018). This disconnect is exacerbated by fraught relations between researchers and research ethics committees in which distrust becomes prevalent: distrust from researchers who view review committees as adversarial, bureaucratic, and lacking in situational ethical competence; and a perception that ethics committees view researchers as inherently unethical, unprofessional, and lacking in 'ethical competencies' (Bell, 2013; Bono, 2020; Cordner et al., 2012; Gillam & Guillemin, 2018; Tolich & Fitzgerald, 2006).

Against this backdrop, calls for a move to dialogical, reflexive ethics approaches have been led by feminist geographers and participatory action researchers (Allen & Israel, 2018; Blazek & Askins, 2020; Bono, 2020; Cahill, 2007; Pain, 2008; Tolich & Fitzgerald, 2006). These efforts have drawn attention to individual ethical practices, the personal as political, and the need to respect and understand that "ethical concepts and issues are socio-culturally and contextually specific" (Pain, 2008, p. 105). Such approaches are part of the growing calls for stronger recognition of situated ethics: an understanding that ethics are contextually produced and practised, with ethical decisions made based on contextual priorities rather than abstract standards (Ebrahim, 2010).

This brings us to the crux of this paper: how can well-established calls for situated and reflexive research ethics (e.g., Cahill et al., 2007; Cordner et al., 2012; Horton, 2008) be further translated into ethical review processes and practices? How can research ethics processes better work with understandings of ethics as embodied practices and as continually negotiated between researchers and participants (Blazek & Askins, 2020; Dekeyser & Garrett, 2018; McAreavey & Muir, 2011; Smith, 2012)? Or, to borrow a term from Kraftl et al. (2021), how can these processes support and account for the 'response-ability' of researchers in unexpected, situated ethical moments during fieldwork?

Integral to this tension is the current procedural focus on a priori approval which assumes that researchers are cognisant of all potential ethical challenges *before* beginning their research, and that the subsequent research proceeds entirely as planned (Bono, 2020; Tolich & Fitzgerald, 2006; McAreavey & Muir, 2011). This approach presumes a static set of power relations between researcher and participants, positioning participants as inherently vulnerable and in need of protection (Aldridge, 2012; Martin, 2007) while simultaneously overlooking existing landscapes of power and the power of participants and gatekeepers to (re)negotiate their terms of engagement (Gallagher, 2008; Horton, 2008). Moreover, this approach also assumes researchers are immune from vulnerability, overlooking the potential for "acute or delayed adverse or emotional reaction" that academics – students and staff alike – can experience resulting from their research experiences (Howard & Hammond, 2019, pp. 411–412).[3] The danger thus remains that the current research ethics paradigm not only strips participants of agency to inform, influence, or co-design research (Askins, 2007; Cahill, 2007; Pain, 2008) but also limits researchers in their 'response-ability' in using ethical competencies to make dynamic, contextually appropriate ethical adaptations during fieldwork.

Such moments emerge frequently as participants assert agency during the research process. Both Hammett and Jackson have had to contend with ethics approvals requiring the anonymisation of participants but participants then demanding to be named in published works. During one of Jackson's research projects, ethics approval had been granted for interviews and focus groups but the (vulnerable) participants co-opted the research process and transformed these activities into story-telling and creative methods sessions as they felt these activities were most appropriate and the least risky. While some projects may have the time and resources to work through multiple, iterative stages of (and pauses to) research while repeated ethics applications are approved, for many research projects such delays and costs are impractical. Experiences such as these highlight the need for a dynamic and relational research ethics process that recognises that researchers cannot control or pre-empt all emergent ethical considerations, shifting power dynamics, and the agency and active role of research participants throughout the research journey (Blazek & Askins, 2020; Court & Abbas, 2013; Hugman et al., 2011; Mackenzie et al., 2007).

A more responsive research ethics approach would also be better equipped to accommodate and work with the changing positionality of researchers *during* and *after* a research project, and the unanticipated ethical dilemmas and uncertainties that may arise (see Hall, 2009; Huisman, 2008; Wainwright et al., 2018). Current research ethics approvals tend to confine concerns about leaving the field to the sharing of findings and 'giving back' (on this, see Hammett et al., 2019), overlooking the ethical complexities – particularly in relation to social media – of navigating friendships that extend beyond the fieldwork period (Caretta & Cheptum, 2017; Hall, 2009; Huisman, 2008; Kingdon & Cupples, 2003; Sou, 2021).

The fundamental challenge is a disconnect between the static, procedural ethics approach of review processes and the dynamism, tensions, and unexpected ethical moments encountered during fieldwork. In other words, between an instrumentalist approach to 'ethics as (review) process' and a reflexive engagement with 'ethics in (contextual) practice' (Cordner et al., 2012; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The static a priori approval process is ill-suited to the messiness and unpredictability of everyday research encounters (Hall, 2009), does little to encourage researchers to reflect on their practice and experience, and risks researchers engaging in activities that may be encountered as less-than-ethical in practice because they feel compelled to adhere to the specifics of the procedural approval (McAreavey & Muir, 2011).

There is a need for a culture shift, as Morris describes it, from "a compliance culture wherein to be 'ethical' means to conform to the 'prescriptions and proscriptions' of the REC … [to] a situated ethics (Ekberg, 2012) which appreciate[s] the need for flexibility and g[ives] researchers the confidence and support to make in situ decisions without the need for further validation" (Morris, 2015, pp. 229–230). This process would need to be inherently dynamic and reflective,

permeating the entire research process (Sultana, 2007), entrusting researchers to deploy ethical competencies during fieldwork, and empowering researchers to reflect on and learn from dilemmas and failures (Pahl, 2016). Such a move would also allow greater recognition of research ethics as relational and contingent, and as framed by contextual factors and the biographies of all participants (Court & Abbas, 2013; Horton, 2008) and inherently requiring reflexivity (see Pain, 2008; Sultana, 2007).

How, then, can ethics processes be adapted to embed reflexivity while trusting and enabling researchers to make informed and dynamic decisions in response to emergent ethical challenges during fieldwork? How can reflexivity be best incorporated as a space for continuing professional development while minimising the risk of this becoming another onerous administrative task and performative ritual? How might these practices be developed to encourage researchers to reflect and develop skills to respond to unexpected ethical moments (which may not have easy answers)?

4 | ENABLING DYNAMISM

It is now widely accepted that researchers are trusted to undertake, and capable of undertaking, dynamic risk assessment during fieldwork activities. This approach understands that while a detailed risk assessment will have been approved prior to the commencement of activities, emergent risks and changing conditions will require ad hoc decisions during fieldwork. If individuals are trusted to continually assess and adapt practices to mitigate unforeseen risks, and record these decisions on an ongoing basis (allowing for these dynamic decisions to be audited and reviewed), could a similar mechanism be introduced for research ethics?

Our suggestion is not to dispense entirely with a priori ethics approval, but rather to adapt and evolve existing processes to work with the messy realities of fieldwork while fostering constructive reflective learning and continuing professional development. As with dynamic risk assessments, a revised ethics process would require a priori approval but would facilitate ongoing updates and revisions during the research journey. A first step here would be for careful consideration to be given to the design of online ethics application systems – and better utilisation of new technologies – to allow for updates to be made and reviewed in a rapid, dynamic manner. Relatively simple changes to review systems and platforms would allow researchers to update and/or append materials to approved applications on an ongoing basis, outlining and justifying emergent challenges and responses, changes in methods or other ethics-related decisions. Automated notifications could then be provided (as is already done in online research funding platforms, including the UKRI's Joint Electronic Submission System [Je-S] and online collaborative tools such as Google Docs, Miro, and other platforms) to reviewers and/or ethics coordinators for approval, advice, or further review.

To support this effectively, greater institutional recognition of the workloads involved in high-quality ethical review would be required. At present, this work is seen as 'good citizenship' and reliant on the goodwill of colleagues to complete reviews in a timely manner: a commitment to an effective dynamic ethics system would likely require institutional support to invest in providing staff with the time required to facilitate timely reviews on an ongoing basis.

A careful balance would also be needed between the necessity for dynamic updates to be made available for review in case of a periodic ethics audit and ensuring that the dynamic process is not simply performative and instrumental. Crucial to the deeper success of this approach would be for these updates to include reflections and 'lessons learnt' – in other words, moving beyond simple compliance and seeking to reach the 'right decision' and towards ensuring researchers critically reflect on their decision-making processes and are supported in learning from these experiences.

A further option to instil reflective learning in continued professional development would be to ask researchers to maintain a document or portfolio of reflections and evidence relating to dynamic ethics decisions. Akin to a research diary, this would ask researchers to note and reflect on what is happening in the field, the (ethics) decisions made, justifications for these, and the outcomes and lessons learnt. Crucially, by instilling an expectation that researchers maintain an 'ethics diary', this would support the recording of and reflections on not only major ethical dilemmas but also the everyday and seemingly inconsequential ethical decisions encountered during the messiness of the research journey. Such an approach would help capture "the banal, everyday situations that we get into … and the small 'failures' which chequer our practices" which are "of absolutely fundamental importance, ethically" (Horton, 2008, p. 374). Thus, keeping an 'ethics diary' would support practice wherein "ethical issues should be managed when they emerge in research, rather than solely adhere to a set of principles and rules" (Annink, 2016, p. 14) – an approach increasingly referred to as 'everyday ethics' (Horton, 2008).

This diarised approach would supplement existing good practice in maintaining a research diary to record and reflect on the research journey, from ethics questions and thoughts in advance of fieldwork, to detailing the 'doing' of fieldwork

and associated responsive ethical decision-making, and to ethical considerations and decisions involved in leaving the 'field' (from negotiating changing relationships with local communities [e.g., Hall, 2009] to considerations in analysing, writing-up, and archiving data). Such reflective writing is commonly acknowledged as fostering "deep and critical reflection" (O'Connell & Dyment, 2011, pp. 47, 55). Just as reflective learning has become "a focal point" in higher education pedagogy (Dummer et al., 2008, p. 460), reflective writing should form a central component of situated ethical research practice.

To support this, we would need a culture shift in accepting that researchers are not perfect, that things will fail, that realities are uncomfortable (Court & Abbas, 2013), but that they should be trusted to act ethically. This shift – and the suggested documents outlined above – would also encourage us to acknowledge that these very moments of messiness are important in developing ethics training/teaching materials, thereby fostering a culture change wherein research ethics are moved from a bureaucratic to a substantive area of concern. Such a shift would not only "produce more ethical researchers and more ethical research" (Madge, 2007, p. 667) but also provide materials to support the development of more dynamic research ethics training for students. By encouraging a more open, discursive, and reflective approach to research ethics – one that forms part of the continual practice of academics – we hope that universities might shift towards more substantive and participatory pedagogical approaches to teaching research ethics (see Askins, 2008). The maintaining of ethics diaries would, for instance, provide a library of ethically challenging moments and ethical decision-making processes that academics would be able to draw from and utilise in engaging students in learning about research ethics.

5 | TEACHING ETHICS AS A DYNAMIC PROCESS

There is growing recognition that academic ethics training frequently fails to prepare researchers – and in particular, students – for real-life fieldwork challenges (Horton, 2008). While there are examples of excellence and innovation in teaching research ethics (e.g., Askins, 2008), in many instances research ethics training is predominantly concerned with training students to complete the procedural process and required paperwork rather than in developing 'ethical competences' (Bono, 2020). A deeper approach to teaching research ethics, utilising reflective practice and creative resources to engage students in experiential and substantive reflection on ethical conundrums and challenges faced during the everyday messiness of the research journeys, is vital.

Various possibilities to support this deeper approach to learning have already been advocated. Askins (2008) outlines how adopting participatory pedagogies allowed students to substantively engage with actual ethically challenging moments from her own research experience. Such practices are certainly effective but, as Askins' (2008) notes, they are limited by the tendency to compress research ethics teaching into a single, large group teaching session within a broader research design module. While it would be unrealistic to suggest all (geography) degree programmes develop stand-alone research ethics modules, opportunities remain for increasing the profile of, and time spent on, research ethics within existing modules. This may be through running a few smaller-group seminar/workshop activities as well as making greater use of online learning platforms to support flipped-learning as part of scenario-based learning activities. Previous examples of such practice are identifiable. Allen and Israel (2018) highlight such creative resources at the University of California Center for Collaborative Research for an Equitable California, Macquarie University's Online Ethics Training Module, Resources for Research Ethics Education hosted by the University of California, San Diego, and the Resources for Teaching Research Ethics produced by the Poynter Center at Indiana University. Previously, Kearns et al. (1998) outlined their development of an 'interactive ethics project' for teaching, which collected research ethics anecdotes from colleagues that were then used to support students in exploring research ethics within classroom settings.

Advances in technology, and the emergence of creative commons copyright licences, give further impetus to the possibility of developing an extensive online open-access repository of research ethics-related reflections and teaching materials. Experience from a small-scale pilot initiative indicates, while the potential benefits of such a repository are notable, a successful project would require significant resource commitments. With small-scale funding from the Royal Geographical Society, the British International Studies Association, and the Sheffield Institute for International Development, we piloted a limited digital resource of recorded interviews, reflections, and presentations on research ethics encounters during fieldwork. Our experience of building this pilot digital resource for ethics training demonstrated the importance of ensuring a sustained resource support (time, technical, and financial), developing clearer prompts and structures for interviews and reflections, and ensuring a diversity in contributors. Our experiences also underlined the advantages of such an approach and resource in making ethics training more interactive, fostering reflection and

dialogue, and providing real-life case studies of complex and everyday ethical issues. With greater resourcing, stronger planning, and broader recruitment to ensure a much broader array of voices, examples, and reflections, such a repository could provide a vital resource for lecturers and students in exploring the complexities, messiness, and relevance of research ethics.

Linked to this, further opportunities exist in relation to fieldclass teaching and preparation. A core Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) component for geography degrees, field-based teaching is common across geography departments in the UK and requires pre-approval of risk and ethics assessments. Time constraints and procedural factors mean these documents are often completed by fieldclass leaders, with students asked to then read and adhere to the approved ethics paperwork. However, such an approach often results in a superficial engagement by students. To counteract this, fieldclass modules could involve students in co-writing and completing actual or 'dummy' versions of ethics paperwork, and discussion of key questions and considerations with students – including how previous experience, input from partners in the field, or procedural requirements inform certain choices.

While time constraints may preclude this activity, another option is to provide time each day during field-based teaching for staff and students to debrief and reflect on any ethical or moral dilemmas encountered. We have found these to be powerful moments where the limits and restrictions of a priori ethics approvals become most apparent to students, who may raise questions on the ethics of international and intercultural fieldwork, of reciprocity/giving back, of working across difference, of negotiating power dynamics, or how to deal with unexpected interview responses which lead, in unanticipated ways, into sensitive topics. Facilitating these discussions requires a building of trust and openness, of an understanding that conversations are about learning not judging – they are about understanding and developing ethical competencies in making appropriate dynamic decisions (rather than seeking the 'right' decision).

6 | IN CLOSING

Responding to the limitations of the current ethics processes and paradigm, this paper calls for a shift to a dynamic ethics process. This approach would, we suggest, encourage greater substantive reflection and engagement with ethically important moments in research and empower researchers with more transparent, accountable, and responsive ways of engaging with emergent ethical issues. Moving to a responsive and dynamic system, in which researchers are trusted to make ethical decisions in response to emergent dilemmas while being expected to document and record such decisions on an on-going basis, would reaffirm an awareness of ethics as an ongoing process throughout the research journey. Simultaneously, by trusting researchers to have (and act in accordance with their) ethical capabilities, while ensuring review boards are apprised of ethics decisions made, this approach should address persistent distrust between review boards and researchers.

Arguments for relational and reflective ethics are well established among participatory action research practitioners, feminist scholars, and others. However, institutional processes remain resistant to these calls. Key barriers remain in existing policies and online ethics review platforms which are designed and set up solely for a priori approval. As we have outlined above, the acceptance of dynamic risk assessments offers one potential moment of opportunity and pathway towards the development and acceptance of dynamic ethics approvals. As with dynamic risk assessments, we argue that a dynamic ethics process would still require a priori approval but also systems and processes to then facilitate ongoing revision and recording of ethical challenges, dilemmas, and decisions. This process would serve multiple purposes, providing space for researchers to engage in reflexive practice while simultaneously providing an evidence trail to demonstrate that appropriate ethics decision-making processes were followed in case of a periodic ethics audit.

More broadly, a culture change in our engagement with ethics is needed to support continuing development and reflexive practice. The complex, messy, and uncertain ethical challenges encountered in social science research can – and should – be used to inspire dynamic, engaging teaching and reflection. Ethics training should engage with the messy realities of fieldwork, and thereby engage students with both the practical importance of research ethics and the recognition that ethical competencies are vital transferable skills. A move towards a dynamic ethics approach, with reflexivity and response-ability at its core, would allow research ethics processes to serve the needs of researchers and foster a deeper, substantive engagement with research ethics in practice. By providing greater opportunity for ongoing, dynamic ethics assessments, such an approach would not only ensure institutions could evidence their meeting of legal requirements but also facilitate and support researchers in continually developing their ethical capabilities.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Project Camelot was a proposed military project to invest in the social sciences in order to understand revolutionary movements and counter-insurgency methods and influence social movements in South America and South East Asia.

[2] The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, overseen by the U.S. Public Health Service, was "an observational study of over 400 sharecroppers with untreated syphilis" which ran from 1932 to 1972 (Corbie-Smith, 1999, p. 5). As an observational study, none of the black men in the study were informed of their diagnosis, given treatment or counselled in avoiding the spread of syphilis. As Corbie-Smith succinctly notes, the study "has come to represent not only the exploitation of blacks in medical history, but the potential for exploitation of any population that may be vulnerable" (1999, p. 5).

[3] While groups such as the Emotionally Demanding Research Network (EDRN) at the University of Sheffield provide peer support for researchers navigating vulnerable research contexts and experiences, ethical research committees have been relatively slow to acclimatise. A Specialist Research Ethics Guidance Paper, 'Emotionally Demanding Research: Risks to the Researcher', was endorsed by Sheffield's University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) in March 2019, bringing much-needed attention to the wellbeing of researchers "engaged in sensitive, upsetting or traumatic study areas" (UREC, 2019 https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.834056!/file/SREGP-EmotionallyDemandingResearch.pdf).

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