Northumbria Research Link

Codes, Committees and Other Such Conundrums!

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Abstract

How do we engage with research ethics? How can we engage with research ethics? From 'doing' them, to 'teaching' them, to sitting in committees about them … This is a brief effort at teasing out some of the problems and potentialities of encapsulating issues that, I argue, are emergent through social relations in place – ethics are always contextual – within academic structures and other official organisation. Key concerns surround the tensions between increasing corporatisation and auditing within universities, the diverse range of research undertaken, and the different epistemological approaches to what constitutes ethics within research.

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So I was at the RGS-IBG annual bash 2006, giving a paper in the 'Participatory ethics for human geography' sessions[2], which covered quite a range

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[2] Titled "How (very) dare we? Ethics, participatory approaches and pedagogy".

of thorny issues. At the end of the second session, time and space was made for discussion. Given that this occurred last thing, last day of conference, the enthusiasm caught up in the debate emphasised how important those of us present considered the issues to be - and here we are now with a journal issue devoted to them. That would be because one issue raised that Friday afternoon was the lack of engagement regarding 'research ethics' in the literature. Hmmm, you might be thinking, stick that phrase in a search engine and there's tons of stuff out there. Stick 'participatory' and 'ethics' in and there's a well-established debate surrounding power and the 'dangers of localism', particularly within the development field (eg. see Mohan and Stokke, 2000). Yes, but – we all said – these are issues we're struggling with still, now (or now, still) … that is they're not going away/we haven't got 'em sussed. Well, I would argue they're never going away and we won't ever have them sussed, since I work from a perspective that envisages *ethics as emergent through social relations in place*. My paper had been questioning any assumption that I possess some kind of 'absolute knowledge' or authority regarding ethics that I am able to 'pass on' to students, and suggesting that we need a more participatory approach to 'teaching'[3] research ethics itself, and it is this notion of ethics as 'processually enactive' (McCormack, 2003) that I want to hold onto here too …

A special issue, then, OK but being asked to contribute raised an ethical dilemma for me in itself. My presentation was already in the process of publication and I have problems with saying the same thing twice[4] (Fuller and Askins, 2007). Another topic of discussion at the RGS-IBG was about the need to get involved and active in our own institutions' engagements with research ethics: access those ethics committees and the 'codes'/processes they implement. Since I raised this point initially, I figured I should take myself seriously, and had volunteered to represent my Division (of Geography) on our School (of Applied Sciences) ethics committee when I got back from conference. There was a meeting just a couple of weeks after I agreed to 'write something about participation and ethics'. An ethnography of ethics committees seemed to be in order, then - a chance to marry the 'activism within the academy' one of my colleagues champions, and reflexively examine the ways in which I am positioned with regards to research ethics. So I turned up at my first meeting armed with consent forms, explained myself briefly and asked permission to record the meeting for the purpose of analysing its

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[3] I use parenthesis around the word to question the assumption mentioned, and to deconstruct the unequal power relationships between lecturers and students.

[4] In the same literary environment, that is – I do support making the same points in different ways across a range of different audiences (eg. academic, policy, popular media, community groups etc.)

discussion with a view to publication – offering anonymity[5], a copy of the transcript for verification and opportunity to comment on a draft of the paper of course!

What you have here, then, is a flavour of the issues at stake in my own context/academic environment. Necessarily brief, my aim is to highlight some of the key tensions we/I am grappling with and how I think they are situated in some of the broader thinking on participation and ethics … that is, my focus is on our participation in/with committees/codes as 'knowledgeable agents' (after Borda, 1998) rather than the ethics of undertaking participatory research.

To do just a little scene setting first: each of the nine Schools at Northumbria have an ethics committee, while there is one over-arching University Ethics Committee (made up of members of School committees). The idea is that 'issues of concern' should be dealt with in-School as far as possible, with only 'serious dilemmas' going to the University committee. Hmmm.

One form fits all (?)

> CH: OK so […] the ethical approval process … what we have operating then … after various e-mail debate … it is covered initially […] by the hazard and risk assessment form detailing people's responsibility so this form […] should be for all projects … with the final question on that form ethical consideration … clearance required … yes slash no … the student and or supervisor completes so we should be using that form first yeah and that relates to staff undergrad postgrad consultancy everyone.[6]

Ethical consideration/clearance required?	Y	N
If ethical consideration or clearance is required for the project consult the School Ethics Committee		

Figure. 1: Relevant section of the School 'Hazard and Risk Assessment' form.

Developed over the previous year, this is the initial engagement with ethical consideration regarding research across my School. Tick 'yes' and you complete form E1 which asks whether your study involves requiring informed consent; drugs/placebos; blood/tissue samples; financial inducements; 'deception of

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[5] Oops: have since realised – and informed individuals – that all minutes of committee meetings (including the names of those present) are placed, as a matter of record, in 'public folders' on the University's e-mail system. Tricky …

[6] All transcript quotes are from the ethics committee meeting.

participants'; and involvement of NHS patients or staff. 'Yes' to any of these and you complete form E2 which comes to the School ethics committee whereupon we complete form E3 giving approval (subject to amendments) or not. Mountains of paperwork aside, the underlying worry is that ethical considerations are not taken seriously:

> **AB:**   I was wondering whether we can expand this … 'cos it just says 'ethical considerations? yes or no … obviously there are some people that haven't raised ethical issues with their projects with it being just yes/no then it's maybe easy to ignore it …
>
> **AR:**   like mentioned on form E1
>
> **CH:**   yes that that kicks in so yes you're s'posed to go to E1 if you tick yes on the hazard and risk assessment
>
> **AB:**   but it's not specifically raising it so people might not think they have to go to E1 if they tick no or ignore potential ethical issues … or don't realise there are issues

While there are connecting points across health and safety (H&S) and ethics, as things currently stand, the latter are all but subsumed in our 'Hazard and Risk Assessment', which focuses on H&S. Reading through the transcript, this initially appears to be a function of a drive for one form that makes reporting systems simplified for all concerned – a case of bureaucracy ordering our (non-) engagement with ethics rather than procedures demanded by a conscientious approach. Dubious enough, but underlying this is more than 'convenience'; a closer reading reveals that we are concerned with not getting our asses sued, or at least not being in breach of the law. The School has a H&S officer, and the H&S At Work Act is taken very seriously (as it should be). There is no equivalent post for ethics because there is no law (not that I'm arguing there should or could be, indeed I think there is a risk of confusing ethics with law via reliance on codes). My question here is why such a narrow deference to law? Some answers can be found, I think, in the arguments around the repositioning of universities as more corporate 'businesses', entailing a new managerialism that structures us in systems of competition and protection, and what has been described as an 'audit culture' (Strathern, 2000) that leads to 'manufacturing ethics' (Thrift, 2003).

But we're so diverse …

So, one conundrum such structures precipitate is the need to shoehorn a wide range of interests into one process/one form. Our School incorporates the Divisions of Biological and Food Sciences; Biomedical Sciences; Chemical and Forensic Sciences; Environmental Management; and Geography. Hence all the drugs, blood and NHS stuff above. I can't resist it:

> **AL:**   for example I do projects with semen but we don't use human semen we use bovine semen … so would I have to … bring that forward [to this committee] or is that OK for me as a supervisor to have said well if I was going to use human semen that would have been dodgy so I'm not so it's OK

> **CH:**   what I'd like to be able to do is tell the university ethics committee that we have done that

> **AL:**   right

There's no space here to get into the 'animal rights' debate or theoretical attempts to open up ethical thinking to the geographies of non-human worlds (see Whatmore, 2002), rather I want to highlight what seems to be a gulf in ideology between what can broadly be described as two sides of the School: the 'scientists' and 'us'. In the Divisions of Environmental Management and Geography we view all research as having ethical dimensions (I'll get back to this), while there was an assumption in the committee discussion that research not involving living human participants or human 'parts' doesn't require ethical consideration. From a *learning and teaching perspective*, though, we surely need to recognise the place of ethics more broadly within the university 'experience'. Vujakovic and Bullard (2001) write about the 'autonomous learner' as responsible for the 'direct and indirect' impacts of their words and actions within *but also beyond* the field research paradigm, in terms of working with other students/staff and in the writing/presentation of materials. By narrowly defining what kind of research may raise ethical issues, are we not misunderstanding what constitutes ethical behaviour, of ourselves as much as students/others? That is, thinking only about ethics within a research framework disables engagement with the embeddedness of ethical decision-making in everyday university encounters (and ex-academic encounters) – it denies ethics as emergent through social relations in (many) place(s).

… and there's just not time!

That it is difficult for us to deal with this stuff when we're already running around overworked is clear: where does sitting on the committee come in my 'work-load spreadsheet'?; no one wanted a copy of the transcript of the meeting, nor have I had any comments on the draft of this paper I circulated – colleagues have intimated that it's hard enough to find time to read minutes before a meeting let alone anything else. And as far as the meetings themselves go:

> **CH:**   so if we have a look at the minutes of the last meeting which were a long time ago now … in January […] we're on the October meeting … and the intention would be to have the next in January … unless we decide otherwise

Our university does, however, appear to be committed to taking ethics issues seriously, and offers staff training, including at time of writing:

Ethics and Governance: **storage of records/data** (half day);

Ethics and Governance: **Safety of Researchers** (half day); and

Ethics Training: Ethics Committee Members/Research Management (two full days).

Wouldn't you know, I can't attend any due to teaching and field trip commitments! Yet we, as researchers/academics are the 'knowledgeable agents' (after Borda, 1998) in this context - if the above sessions were being undertaken from a PAR perspective our participation would be *facilitated*. Recognising that that is not the way university structures work, I guess I'm saying that we need to make our voices heard. That means challenging our conditions of labour (again) in the struggle to have such work acknowledged.

Resultant practices

> **CH:**   apologies we didn't actually have a June meeting but we've done some Chair's action along the way […] so now we want to note them here …in response to the divisional aspect BFS en masse … have sent me […] a list of projects and filled out the E1 to E3 forms seeking approval for a variety of projects if I just go through the sort of titles … there is analysis of human DNA there is a dietry and lifestyle assessment projects involving children … dietry intervention […] sensory evaluation and ... individuals with poor health bone disease and eating disorders … so basically details underneath and the fact that they will anonymise the data and … so they detail a whole series of steps that they will take so the one about children has got to do with CRB checks for example … OK so we just want to note that we have received the application for that and we've said fine …

Let me explain, 'cos I was somewhat blown away by this statement at the meeting! The Division of Biological and Food Sciences (BFS) run 'standard' undergraduate dissertation projects every year – staff had compiled a list of titles/topics that students choose from, and written up a 'bulk approval' request with an understanding that, once projects are approved there is no need to seek approval year on year unless changes are made to project themes or new subjects added to the list. So - who is considering ethical issues then? Campbell and Shapiro (1999) write about the danger of codes of ethics as absolving those undertaking the research from engagement with issues as they arise (see also Harris et al., 1995), calling instead for an 'ethics of encounter' not hijacked by commitments to

'resolution or closure'. The 'tick box' process outlined earlier runs the same risk, that students will not/do not consider ethics in relation to their behaviour because a project already has 'ethical clearance', undermining the moral autonomy we should be emphasising in relation to the production of research (see Truman, 2003). The practice in geography and environmental management is very different:

> **AF:**   in our particular context … invariably there are ethical issues […] for us when we're teaching research methods ethics is at the heart of everything they're doing … [and] our forms fit into what we do with them … there are staged meetings you know our form doesn't exist as just a form there is teaching that backs it up[7]

> […]

> **K**   it's embedded in teaching […] getting them to explore the issues … as AF was saying it's a much broader package … the module's all about getting them ready for dissertations so the form goes out to whoever is most suitable to be their supervisor … then the supervisor sits down with the student and goes through those H&S AND ethics with them … and then we sign the forms when we're happy they are considering the issues in sufficient depth […] of course we have issues to address still in the division about consistency around how we as supervisors view enough depth how much detail we expect etc

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[7] See Fig. 2 for the form discussed here.

Ge097 Research Design Ethics Assessment

The pro-forma should be completed and attached to the final assessment handed in for GE097 Research Design.

Tick the boxes in column 2 to indicate ethical aspects of your project and briefly outline reasons

Ethical domain	Applies to my project	Outline reasons
Positionality & power: relationships with subjects, consent, issues regarding gender, 'race', sexuality, ability.		
Confidentiality, anonymity, both of subjects and resulting data.		
Environmental impacts; e.g. from transport, damage to habitats, pollution.		
Non-malfeasance; "do no harm", e.g. raise expectations, emotional well-being of subjects, over-researching.		
Study, collection of and treatment of non-human living organisms.		

Fill in a part 2 form in more detail for each of the categories ticked

Student signature……………………………..

Supervisor signature……………………..

Figure. 2: Form completed by undergraduate and masters students in the Divisions of Geography and Environmental Management before starting their dissertation research.

Don't get me wrong, we (in geography and environmental management) have improvements to make in terms of how we address research ethics with students, but we've made a start by recognising students as 'knowledgeable agents' themselves and employing a more participatory approach to pedagogy. This is critical, I believe, to move beyond the 'tick box' mentality and towards an 'ethics of encounter' regarding research by students – but also how can such thinking be incorporated across a diverse School with different epistemological approaches to what constitutes ethics?

Moving forwards -

>   **CH:**   what about […] we get some relevant people together to see to relook at the forms and improve them and get one better one? […] so MJ would be your nominee to take that forward?

>   **K**   yeah and I would be happy to be involved because I work with MJ on the ethics stuff…

'K' by the way is me. MJ (for very valid reasons) said that he couldn't take this on, so I've been taking the lead in a 'working group' of four of us reviewing the various forms and procedures in our School to come up with a streamlined, ethically sensitive, uncomplicated, applicable to all 'system'. While I veer towards cynicism as a cultural default, and while I have my doubts as to whether a singular form/process is possible, I agree with Thrift (2003, 119) that "one task is to work on the rules of research ethics committees so that they become amenable to social science research", and especially that "academic-based researchers must work towards institutional changes that facilitate PAR research" (Khanlou and Peter, 2005: 9). We surely have a lot of experience in the field that we should be bringing to the table – whether we adopt participatory approaches in our own methodologies or not. Frustrating as they may be, committees and codes regarding research ethics aren't going away anytime soon. Refusing to engage with them is one way of trying to resist a corporatising tendency within the academy. But the experiences I've been narrating here lead me to suggest that in order to promote good practice around ethics and research, being involved in those systems/structures is, in itself, an ethical decision. Should we not, as members of the 'academic profession' have an 'ethics of care' regarding what happens beyond our own research, and beyond our own disciplines?

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I'm now editing this paper to produce a final draft, several months after the first, and the working group has come up with a single form to be used by all staff, postgraduates and third year undergrads doing their dissertations (see http://northumbria.ac.uk/static/5007/ethicsconsiderationform.pdf). And I'm quite

happy with it. Rather than rewrite this paper focusing on the outcome, though, I've decided to retain emphasis *on process* as I think this raises important issues that such a form remains caught up in. And whether our (tentative) outcome effects change in approaches to, understandings of and practices regarding research ethics remains to be seen - it'll be piloted over the next academic year (2007/8). And that's another story for a future article, perhaps …

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