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The Ethics Rupture: Exploring alternatives to formal research ethics review edited by Will C. van den Hoonaard and Ann Hamilton. 2016. University of Toronto Press. Toronto Buffalo London. ISBN 978-1-4426-2608-9 (paper) \$39.95.

I remember the day I started to question the efficacy of University ethics systems. I was part of a team researching live interactive performances on the streets of Coventry, and the responses of audience-participants to those interventions. We had our ethical approval in place, and were dutifully handing out consent forms to those we were interviewing, observing and (on occasion) filming. I was struck by an overwhelming sense that what we were actually doing was itself something of a performance, a performance most of our respondents were uninterested in. Why were we clumsily handing out those forms? Ostensibly to protect those audience members from harm, but also, importantly, to protect ourselves and the reputation of the academic institution we represented.

More consequential it seemed to me at the time were the ethical decisions we were making moment by moment as we carried out the research: To interview this person rather than that person; whether or not to believe someone when they told us they were over 18; how to respond appropriately to unanticipated revelations from our informants; and how (and when) to extract ourselves from contexts that might have been making us feel uncomfortable or even unsafe.

At a later date, my cynicism became more firmly entrenched. Sitting in for a colleague at an ethics committee meeting I reflected on the above to make the point that although prior planning is important, many such decisions can only be considered in the moments of field research. This I asserted confidently (and on reflection naively) as what seemed to me a

straightforward consequence of researching *with* people in a context where liveness and unpredictability were a part of the research problem under investigation. My assertion was met with confusion and derision: apparently *all* ethical problems can be predicted - and importantly nullified - before a researcher even steps out of the door.

This seemed to me a startling logicⁱ, and since that time I have made a point of having discussions with research students about the many realities of field research, encouraging them not to fear openness and reflexivity on these themes. But at times I have pondered the legitimacy of that approach when research ethics systems have themselves changed so little. And then I read *The Ethics Rupture*.

This collection of essays is unforgiving in its analysis of the state of University ethics discourses. Refreshingly so. Every few pages a powerful and searing critique is presented that leaves me wishing it had been at hand in that meeting all those years ago. Iara Coelho Zito Guerriero argues 'researchers are not neutral' and that 'ethics ... and informed consent ... are not (and should not be) limited to a specific moment' (p.269). Lisa-Jo Kestin van den Scott contends that 'consent forms equal neither permission nor consent' (p.239). Ron Iphofen boldly declares that 'all research contains harm' (p.392), and Robert Dingwall feels it necessary to remind us that 'ethical principles are not self-enacting' (p.26).

How can it be that the above reads as a list of radical assertions? Perhaps because in sum they amount to an unravelling of the reasoning that underpins our current 'regimes' (Hamilton and van den Hoonard: p.409) of ethics review, and could do much to de-stabilise their influence.

In the face of centralised University ethics systems that leave little room for nuance or the exceptional Dingwall asserts that ‘academic freedom is not about self-indulgence; it is about innovation’ (Dingwall: 30). This is an important point, but I am not confident it can gain broad traction in societies we now call ‘post-factual’, and where ‘expertise’ is easily dismissed. It might seem to many in higher education that academic freedom has become a luxury afforded only to certain academics, and only some of the time. The danger is that for the rest of us systems such as (but not limited to) ethics review stifle the research questions seen as desirable and the kinds of methods deemed defensible. Marco Marzano echoes Foucault’s contention that ‘ethical behaviour and the practice of freedom coincide - we are ethical *and* free or we are neither’ (p.112). To Marzano we are *not* free when we participate in the performances associated with current systems of ethical review, and as such, our capacity to be even remotely ethical in practice is compromised. Adler and Adler also reference Foucault when they call ethics systems and the cultures they produce a ‘panopticon of compliance’ (p.79). The authors concur that ethics review has become a nightmare of ‘Orwellian’ magnitude.

The Ethics Rupture is a lengthy text at 464 pages, including 20 chapters plus introduction and closing reflections. That does make this a difficult book to devour even though a close read is more than rewarded. More likely readers will dive straight into those chapters of interest given their own research approaches, perhaps especially when called upon to defend them. One thing the book does very well is offer practical examples of the ways researchers have bent and flexed current guidelines in order to fit their needs and perspectives. There are also compelling insights into researchers’ own experiences of appearing in front of ethics boards (see chapters by Murray, Adler and Adler, and Holland).

There is some repetition of themes and perspectives between chapters although this doesn't read problematically, only adding strength to the argument that there are consistently contentious areas to be addressed. These areas of overlap include reflections on the broad increase in ethical scrutiny and surveillance (and significant 'mission creep'), questions about who gets to decide what being ethical means, debates about the appropriate terminologies for 'the researched', the fear of legislative comeuppance, and the persistence of the biomedical model as the default research approach from which all others are seen to digress. There is throughout the book a deep distrust of University administrators who 'are encouraged to treat deviations from the standard as methodologically and ethically suspect' (Lederman: 43) and who help to foster an 'adversarial culture'. (Israel, Allen and Thomson: 286)

Beyond this there are many fascinating topics addressed, including some I have not seen extensively contemplated elsewhere. Natasha S. Mauthner encourages readers to think about the ethics of data archival and sharing. In separate chapters both Laura Stark and van den Scott ask readers to observe the monolingualism at the heart of current ethics discourses. Patrick O'Neill warns of troublesome inconsistency in risk assessment procedures. Zachary M. Schrag picks up on the role of professional associations. Igor Gontcharov tackles our lexicon for talking about those we research (with); our 'subjects' and 'participants' (p.248). Marzano questions the status of covert research within current systems of ethics review. Heather Kitchin Dahringer's chapter on online research methods is especially intriguing. At what point, she asks, is a 'human participant' created online? (p.138) And how might we begin to differentiate between public and private on the Web? Ethical and legal distinctions between public and private might diverge spectacularly, meaning that our assumptions about what constitutes the public domain on the internet are often erroneous.

The Ethics Rupture - as can be discerned from the title - is conceived of as an intervention. Its goal is to make readers imagine ethics processes differently. It also reads as a stark warning to those who operate within less draconian 'regimes' of ethical approval and surveillance than those in the United States or Canada (for example). If 'mission creep' is tolerated unchecked, then over time the very systems put in place to protect those we work with could rupture the very relationships and collaborations we have worked so hard to put in place.

So what of the 'alternatives' to these systems that are proposed in the title? Although the book reflects some researchers' calls for a 'dismembering' (p.427) of the current system this is not presented as a serious proposal, and as such wholesale alternatives are not really preferred. Rather, we are presented with ways in which researchers might disrupt the current system from within. It is somewhat disheartening (although unsurprising) that in the final analysis most of the authors and editors conclude the burden of responsibility for change must fall to individual researchers themselves. Kate Holland suggests that researchers should include potential participants in the process of ethics review itself. Ann Hamilton and Will C. van den Hoonaard propose an 'education model' (p.423) wherein we do more to promote and present our research within our institutions. Lederman proposes that we should join the boards ourselves to 'work towards reciprocal cross-disciplinary translations of ethico-methodological values to improve mutual understanding' (p.65) although there is disagreement about whether this is a useful approach (Patricia A. Adler and Peter Adler think not). Emma Tumilty, Martin B. Tolich and Stephanie Dobson are experimenting with an open access online repository for sharing ethical applications. The books promise of catalyzing systemic change in the short to medium term begins to look shaky.

Above all else, what *does* emerge powerfully from this book is the need for individual researchers to commit to and sustain ‘a path of self-reflection on ethics in research’ (van den Scott p.237). How else can they expect to have confidence in their own judgement as they set the forms aside and step out into the field?

Notes

i At the time I recall reading Jenny Hughes’ account of seeking ethical approval within an HE setting, which she had termed a process of ‘Ethical Cleansing’ (2005).

References

Hughes, Jenny. 2005. ‘Ethical cleansing? The process of gaining ‘ethical approval’ for a new research project exploring performance in place of war’ in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance* 10(2) pp. 229-232.