

‘Have we become too ethical?’: International symposium at Sussex and colloquium at Durham Universities

Article (Accepted Version)

Simpson, Bob and Sleeboom-Faulkner, Margaret (2017) ‘Have we become too ethical?’: International symposium at Sussex and colloquium at Durham Universities. *Anthropology Today*, 33 (2). pp. 32-33. ISSN 0268-540X

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‘Have we become too ethical?’

International symposium at Sussex and colloquium at Durham Universities

Simpson, B. and Sleeboom-Faulkner, M. (2017), ‘HAVE WE BECOME TOO ETHICAL?’: *International symposium at Sussex and colloquium at Durham Universities*. *Anthropology Today*, 33: 32–33. doi:10.1111/1467-8322.12340 <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1467-8322.12340/epdf>

Bob Simpson & Margaret Sleeboom-Faulkner

In November 2015 we held an international conference which posed the question ‘Have we become too ‘ethical’? Sixty social-science researchers, delegates from research funders and representatives of professional associations from anthropology and sociology from the UK, Europe and beyond came together to discuss the tensions that arise when ‘sensitive’ research, including studying the powerful, or research involving ‘vulnerable subjects’ is put forward for ethical review.

Of course, the inverted commas in the title signal an irony. We were not suggesting any move towards a lesser regard for the well-being of the people or communities amongst whom we work, but rather signalling a concern about the continued growth of research regulation through institutional review by committee. It would seem that the work the term ‘ethics’ now does has been subject to a conceptual elastification such that it is made to cover domains that are outside the spirit of what ethical review was originally all about. Most notably these domains now bring in risk assessment, institutional back-covering, health and safety, matters of insurance and, most recently, the UK Government’s anti-radicalisation Prevent strategy¹ [

Our concerns, and the reason for calling the meeting, were threefold. First, ethical review by committee can appear a very blunt instrument when it comes to dealing with ethnographic or qualitative research that involves long-term relationships based on trust and familiarity which might have to be built in under difficult and delicate circumstances. Second, the form that some ethical review takes may, albeit unwittingly, restrict a researcher’s approach and methods, and even prevent certain kinds of research being carried out at all – a predicament that faces some approaches more than others. Third, we know little about whether ethical review by committee when applied to research projects mitigates or introduces harms to the people we conduct research among. We were keen to understand whether we were indeed becoming ‘too ethical’.

The discussions on the day were lively and engaged. Out of the plethora of issue covered, three themes emerged as warranting further reflection.

The first, which we returned to in various forms and guises throughout the day, concerned a fundamental epistemological disjunction. Put simply, the kinds of research implicit in the dominant models of ethical review are often at odds with what is required for a researcher to achieve access to, and acceptance in, the field over time. For example, prior ethical review assumes certain levels of predictability and specification regarding the proposed research.

However, an approach, which in practical terms can only proceed on the basis of open-ended, inductive, improvisatory and collaborative relations, does not sit

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/.../prevent-strategy-review.pdf>

comfortably with requirements that start with distance, deduction and methodological closure. Similarly, presumptions about autonomous subjects, the management of informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, doing good and doing harm and so forth may assume levels of prescience that are problematic at the scales of engagement envisaged. Ethical strategies that originate outside of the field might thus be misunderstood, found unacceptable or prove untenable when introduced into the field given that people may well operate with their own notions of trust, confidence, morality and interests.

Second, it became apparent that there is enormous variation in the way that institutional review is carried out in UK institutions. Consequently, ethnographic projects appear to fare rather differently in settings where there are centralised ethics committees. Where committees are devolved to faculty and departmental level the specificity appeared greater and the attitude towards ethical review somewhat less adversarial. The extent of variation, in what many assumed to be standardised processes, was surprising.

Third, it was clear that for PhD students or early career researchers the ethical landscape before them is a very complex one to navigate made up as it is of ethical review, professional codes, disciplinary custom and practice and recent calls for the cultivation of ‘research integrity’. All of these carry necessary but nonetheless significant overheads for those undertaking scholarly research.

In August 2016 we followed up our workshop with a colloquium – ‘How can we become more “ethical”?’ More irony! Having established three areas on which we might make practical progress we invited fifteen people with something to say on matters of i) epistemology and methodology, ii) research ethics and governance and iii) how, in practical terms, we might help early career researchers get a better handle on the complex business of being ethical. The group encompassed researchers, post-grads, post-docs, ethics committee members and funders all with an interest on the travails of ethnographic research in ethical review by committee.

The question of epistemology and ethical review is a perennial for those involved in research, which involves ethnography, participant-observation or what are generally referred to as ‘naturalistic’ methods, that is, without any intentional manipulation by the observer. The fault-line here revolves around the nature of the relationship with those that come under the researcher’s gaze. Are they subjects and informants or participants and collaborators? The approach to research ethics that is currently practiced by RECs presumes the objectification of subjects and informants without taking into account the interactions and negotiations that need to take place for the research to happen. For anthropologists in the field these tend to be part of the research process itself. Thus, the way a researcher accesses the field is, from the very outset an important part of it. It is for this reason that, when research ethics committees demand information on and prior permissions from institutions in the research field, the research process can be affected quite badly given that the nature of the research may be essential to the very possibility of gathering data in the first place. Depending on research aims and power relations in the field, researchers ‘studying up’ or exploring what are known as dubious practices will not be able to gain access to essential data if at the same time adhering to research ethics as defined by research ethics committee at the home institution. In short, to operate entirely within predefined models of research may limit the ability to carry out much-needed research

projects as well as stifling the creative and imaginative development of research that unfolds according to other ethical criteria.

The question of institutional governance and its growing imbrication with ethical review is one that casts a long shadow over researchers. Prior to the colloquium we gathered some general information about the institutional forms that ethical review takes in the UK. The survey of publicly available materials revealed considerable variation ranging from highly centralised institutional review procedures through to more devolved practices functioning at departmental level. What was readily apparent from this overview was that the more generic the scope of the review committees, the louder the complaints of those presenting ethnographically inspired projects tended to be. Conversely, the closer the committees were to the particularities of disciplinary approach, the more constructive the review of projects was felt to be. ‘Mission creep’ of ethical review was a particular concern as the widening scope of ‘ethics’ was felt to obscure some of the primary objectives of ethical review.

In one of our exercises we asked small groups to comment on ethics forms gathered from four UK institutions. In one group there were three mainland Europeans including a European Research Council administrator from the Council’s research ethics secretariat. The different forms we looked at made explicit some very different tenors at work in ethical review. These varied from haute bureaucratic and institutional formality through to well-meaning attempts to make the exercise constructive and accessible. If literary deconstruction was our aim it was clear that the creators of the various forms had very different target subjects in mind. All the Mainland Europeans in the group, and especially the ERC participant, were horrified at the levels of bureaucratisation that British researchers had to work through.

How to help early career researchers? The third theme of the colloquium was the very real challenge that researchers face when first conceiving of their research and engaging with ethical review. The metaphor that suggested itself was that of a complex terrain which had to be negotiated. Our proposal, consistent with this metaphor, was for an ethical navigation tool or EthNav for short. This would be an open access document, which simply maps the terrain explaining form and purpose of ethical review, professional codes, disciplinary custom and practice and research integrity, and the way that these are related to one another.

On the one hand, the tool would help the researcher decipher why *different things* are subsumed under one heading. For example, women, children, people with a disability, patients, people in developing countries and so forth can all be subsumed under the notion of ‘vulnerability’, even though ‘vulnerability’ has widely diverging meanings and implications, depending on context and situation.

On the other hand, the EthNav could help elucidate what the *same notions* means in different contexts. Thus, the notions of ethics, data, informed consent, benefit-sharing and so forth acquire their meaning and relevance only in relation to the ethics of the research and the people involved. An important objective of this tool would be to emphasise that, for the kinds of research undertaken, reflecting on ethics is not an event but a process which unfolds over time and, moreover, one which extends well beyond the submission of an ethical review form. It entails awareness of ethical responsibility in the field and the on-going exercise of ethical skill in managing relationships and situations. It also extends beyond the field into the ethics of data management, writing and representation. Becoming more ethical, then,

involves ways and means of how this broader view of ethics can be embedded in the research curriculum.