

# Anthropology News



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### **The Research Ethical Review Black Box**

*By Maureen H Fitzgerald and Elisa Yule (U Sydney)*

For many researchers (social science and medical alike) the research ethical review process, particularly what happens during committee meetings, is like the proverbial black box. You insert an application in one side and out the other side comes a letter that says “please explain” or “approval is subject to . . .” The questions, comments and directives in these letters are generally decontextualized. You do not know exactly what happened in the meeting to evoke them. What is the concern or problem? At best, there are only vague clues on how to respond. These letters often seem to make little sense, especially with the most inaccessible (what we call “closed”) committees. In fact, they often raise ethical and methodological concerns.

Social scientists’ frustration with the review process is not new. It has been around since the inception of research ethical review committees (IRBs in the US, HRECs in Australia, REBs in Canada) in the 1960s. Attention to the review of research involving social science methods and methodologies has waxed and waned. In the 1990s there was resurgence. In part this was because of a changing social, cultural and technological context—and a few events identified as “crises,” and, in part, because methods from the social sciences are increasingly being used in health-related research by both social scientists and their health science colleagues. The fact that these researchers often work with potentially “vulnerable” populations and people from a range of cultural backgrounds compounds the concerns and issues involved, particularly when their research is reviewed by committees whose primary focus is medical research.

After a number of years trying to deal with the issues and concerns we came up with a novel idea: why not approach this from an anthropological

perspective? We study other aspects of our lives this way, look into other black boxes, why not the ethical review process?

Our research is, thus, a response to increasing concerns related to the ethical review of research, particularly that associated with social science paradigms and vulnerable or sensitive populations and topics. It is an attempt to use anthropology and its methods to address an issue that has the potential to have a significant impact on the nature of social science research, particularly in health contexts, and the people involved. It is an attempt to take a positive approach to a vexing problem. The project is not about research ethics per se. It is about trying to understand this very human, cultural process call research ethical review.

We are using a variety of methods, including analyses of international ethics related documents and literature; instrumental or case studies; key informant interviews with researchers, ethics committee members, policymakers and others in the community; and observation of committees in the process of deliberation. The project, “An Analysis of Research Ethics and The Ethical Review Process as Culture and Cultural Process,” is currently funded by a three year Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grant. At this point we are focusing on Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand, and the US, countries that share some historical and cultural roots and ones that have a significant impact on research throughout the world.

By the way, this project does have ethical approvals.

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