Ethnography, Ethnographic Moments, the Ethics-Review Process and the Construction of Knowledge

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Abstract

The ethics review of ethnography, as a form of knowledge construction, is contentious. This paper based on a five country ethnography of the ethics-review process uses an ethnographic moment, being uninvited to a conference related to research ethics, as a way to explore ethnography as a form of knowledge construction and why its review seems so contentious. It suggests that analyses of ethnographic moments can provide a stimulus for better understanding the issues involved. At the core of the problem is a lack of understanding of the nature of ethnography as an unbounded, experience near form of inquiry. Strategies that involve the greater involvement of ethnographers and understandings of the nature of alternative forms of research, and exercises that allow people to identify and explore core assumptions and beliefs about the how knowledge is developed or acquired may help ameliorate some of the problems.

Key Words: Ethnography, Ethnographic moments, Methodology, Research ethics-review

Meaning and knowledge are always in reference to a world constituted in human experience, formulated and apprehended through symbolic forms and distinctive interpretive practices (Good, 1994, p. 177)

Introduction

"It's too ethnographic!" a research ethics committee member exclaimed. My project assistant and I glanced at one another with subtle quizzical expressions: What does "too ethnographic" mean? In this context the comment seemed to be the equivalent of the person throwing up her hands and saying the proposal before her was beyond her comprehension. Such a comment would probably not come as a surprise to many ethnographers as they are convinced that members of research ethics committees have little understanding of alternative approaches to the development of understanding and knowledge about humans beyond clinical trials and questionnaire surveys. Observations from a five country (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States) ethnographic project on the ethics-review process generally support comments like that by Bosk and De Vries (2004, p. 10) who suggest that there is "a trained incompetence when it comes to the inductive methods of qualitative research" and ethnography.

On the other hand, there are occasional surprises. In one meeting, all but two of the members were clearly disparaging of a qualitative study, indicating that they found the information in the application incomprehensible. One of the remaining members, a doctor, tried to help them understand the project by providing what my assistant and I thought was a succinct summary of the project, as we understood it. The other person, another doctor, added to the description, again indicating a perceptive insight into the project. Unfortunately, there are not always members present at ethics committee meetings who are open to or understand the broad range of methodologies to which they might be exposed. As Bosk and De Vries (2004) note, the range of methodologies associated with the social sciences and humanities are so diverse that even specialists in these fields do not always understand them.

What is commonly referred to as qualitative research, and ethnography is often placed in this category, presents one of the most contentious areas in relation to the research

ethics-review process. Ethnographers are among the loudest in their complaints about a system that seems inappropriate for dealing with the concerns and issues such research presents. As Bosk and De Vries and others have pointed out, the regulations and guidelines for ethics review represent a "deep misunderstanding of the realities of ethnographic research and an even deeper misapprehension about how conduct is effectively regulated" in the field (Bosk & De Vries, 2004, p. 3). This misunderstanding and the recognition of it is long standing. In the 1970s and 1980s Wax (e.g. , 1977; 1980; 1982; 1986), Dingwall (1980), and others were already suggesting that ethical discussions had "become … far removed from an adequate understanding of fieldwork" (Dingwall, 1980, p. 871).

Here I use a detailed description of the ethnographic approach used in a research project on the ethics-review process and what I call an "ethnographic moment," being "uninvited" to an invitation only conference, to explore some of the possible reasons why ethnography seems so contentious. The next section provides a detailed description of the research method used in the project, highlighting some areas that often evoke consternation among ethics committee members. This will then lead into a discussion of ethnographic moments and a description of one ethnographic moment. In exploring this information we might begin to understand some of the issues and perhaps see how different approaches to research and the construction of knowledge can raise ethical issues—real and perceived, particularly in regard to "doing ethnography" in its broadest sense.

Method

The use of the ethnographic approach to understanding the research ethics-review process is relatively new, although discussions of issues associated with the ethics review of ethnographic research are not. For example, Hoffmaster (1992) asked: "Can ethnography save the life of ethics?" He suggests that "ethnography has a vital role to play in developing a more empirically grounded theory of morality" (p.1425) and a more relevant approach to the ethics review of research, including that involving an ethnographic approach. This perspective is reflected in the work of other ethnographers who have highlighted the need for more ethnography of the ethics-review process (e.g., Bosk & De Vries, 2004; De Vries, 2003; De Vries, DeBruin, & Goodgame, 2004; van den Hoonaard, 2002a).

Ethnography is both process and product and often "multimethodology research par excellence" (Fitzgerald, 1997, p. 52). The core methods used in this research as described in the grant application and ethics applications include formal and informal interview/discussions with key informants; observations of human research ethics committees in the process of deliberation; collection of ethics-review case materials; and reviews of relevant literature and policy documents. However, this description belies the complexity of ethnography in general and this project in particular. As ethnography, this project also used other sources of data, including analyses of everyday events and naturally occurring and often unanticipated "ethnographic moments" (see below).

Interview/discussions

Formal interview/discussions involved more than 200 people (key informants) representing researchers (student and experienced), ethics committee members, chairs of committees, ethics officers, policy makers, and others involved in the process. They were identified in many ways, including: their names appear regularly in literature or policy documents, I already knew them as colleagues, their names came up often in interviews, others referred me to them or them to me, or, after 2004 and the launch of

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the project website (http://www.ethicsproject.com/), some people contacted me. Prior to the discussion, information on the project and me were offered to key informants (and others) in one or more ways. These included an information sheet provided in person or by email, an email with background information on me and the project, an introduction in a telephone conversation followed by provision of the information sheet or, after 2004, the project website address, which contains all of the same kinds of information. As is common in ethnography, some people have been involved over a period of months, even years, and highlight the relational and on-going nature of relationships associated with ethnography.

Rather than representing a poor, disenfranchised, or "exotic" population commonly associated with ethnographic research, the people involved represent peers and people in elite positions in society who are "exotic" in their own way (see also De Vries, 2003). Thus this project can be seen as "studying up" (Nader, 1972).

The interviews can be best described as interview/discussions between colleagues. They were open and ethnographic in style, drawing heavily on the interview style presented in Spradley's (1979) classic book on ethnographic interviewing. Most were face-to-face, some by telephone, and a few were solely by email. As many people were involved on more than one occasion, interaction may have included any or all of these. Interview/discussions took place in a variety of environments, including offices, restaurants and cafés, my living quarters or that of the informant, during walks, and at conferences and workshops.

Most began with a brief presentation on how the project came to be and what I was trying to learn or, in repeat interactions, an update on what had happened since we had last interacted and, when relevant, the particular reason why we were talking on that occasion. Each discussion was tailored to the person and the context of the interview, and each was unique in style and the information shared. Generally, following opening comments and pleasantries, the informant was offer the opportunity to share whatever the person wanted to share. There was no formal interview guide. I generally simply asked the informant to share information and ideas with me, whatever they thought might be useful. I told people that I did not have specific questions, particularly early in the research, because I did not know enough to know what to ask. Following Spradley (1979), I asked people to be my teachers, and as the research progressed I increasingly asked them to be an advisor, muse, or sounding board. People I had not known before usually began with sharing structural information on the process. Within 15 to 30 minutes we generally moved towards discussion and a more equitable exchange of ideas and information and the testing of preliminary hypotheses and interpretations. These discussions lasted from roughly twenty minutes to more than four hours at a time and, as noted above, with some people there have been multiple interactions over varying periods of time.

I made the decision not to tape record interviews, as I wanted people to feel comfortable to talk freely as peers. When notes were recorded, I used a small notebook. Whether notes were written during a discussion depended primarily on the context. For example, I did not generally pull out my notebook in nice restaurants during a relaxed evening meal or try to write as I walked and talked with someone.

Brief notes were later expanded in password protected computer text files without specific identifying information. Everyone has their own way of writing field notes (Sanjek, 1990). I wrote mine as a dialog, as though I was telling someone (me) about a

meeting or observation. My notes include side comments in square brackets, analytical comments, and tentative interpretations. My field notes also include notes from committee meeting observations, de-identified copies of data-rich emails, and descriptions of other information or experiences that seem potentially relevant to the project. Data on case studies are kept in separate files with some notes in the main field note file. Project assistants have kept separate, additional field note files.[1]

Ethics committee observations

Twenty-nine ethics committees were observed in the process of deliberating on ethics applications. These committees represent a range of common types of committees: regional, local, specialist, and institution based, in the five primary countries involved (Australia=13, Canada=2, New Zealand=3, UK=4, US =7). As with the discussions, and is common in ethnographic observations, observations were unstructured. The observations were guided only by the desire to better understand the nature of the meetings and the kinds of discussions people had in relation to the applications before them. In part, the lack of specific structure in the early stages of the project was because I did not know what it was I needed to know to understand this phenomenon. I knew only that being present during committee deliberations would be important as they are a central and key part of the process, but it is a process that in many cases takes place behind closed doors (Ashcroft & Pfeffer, 2001; Fitzgerald & Yule, 2004; Gillam, 2003).

My field notes on these meetings include information and diagrams on the site of the meeting, how people were placed around the table, when and what kind of refreshments were served. They include a list of the agenda items and the order in which things were discussed and when they deviated from the documents provided at the meeting. They include notes and actual or paraphrased quotes from the discussion. For the most part, the “brief” or “scribbled” notes taken during the meeting are a running, crudely written commentary on the nature of the meeting, the general topics of discussion, when there were in-depth discussions, and so on. When known, they include information on the category of person (chair, lay person, lawyer, etc) who might have engaged in a particular action or raised a particular issue. I did not always know the role identity of all the people around the table and often had to guess based on what they said and how they behaved and, when possible, I checked my guesses with others at the meeting. My notes were in essence free floating and I did not consciously decide what to record. These meetings often move very quickly and it is difficult to keep up with detailed note taking.

Although I did not consciously decide what to record, I did consciously decide what not to record. For example, as iterated in the information sheet, I did not record names of the people involved or the names of any researchers even on the rare occasion that I had access to such information. I did not record specific details of a project when known, but only general descriptions in the form of key words or phrases (e.g., this is a clinical trial on a cancer drug, this is a nutritional study, this is a qualitative study on eating disorders, this is a PhD study on …, etc).

Other data sources

Most of what I have presented in this section is what most people would expect in a description of method section, albeit in slightly greater detail. It makes the study sound like a discrete bounded project in time, place, and method. However, this was an

[1] I conducted all but a few of the interview/discussions. A research assistant was present for many interviews and committee meeting observations. I observed all but one of the meetings and in many cases a project assistant was also in attendance.

ethnographic study and such studies are rarely so discretely bounded. As ethnography, data collection included all kinds of experiences in all kinds of places and times. For an ethnographer data can be found anywhere and include personal experiences, observations, and conversations that are part of everyday life, something many ethics committee members do not seem to understand. Thus data for this project were collected as I attempted to obtain permission to observed committees and as I participated in the development and submission of student and colleagues' ethics applications and their interactions with the committees involved. In some cases this involved a kind of "natural experiment" where we used information gained from the research to try out a new way to present information in an application to see how the committee would respond. Data collection occurred in everyday discussions in my office; formal and informal meetings with colleagues on other topics; workshops and conferences; and informal hallway conversations, or what Downey, Dumit, and Traweek (1997) call "corridor talk" (see below), although these talks tended to occur more often in the photocopier room or during breaks in meetings. I presented on the project in various contexts and the discussions that followed them provided relevant data that helped clarify issues I might have raised, expanded my understanding of a topic or issue, or added specific case materials and reports of personal experiences with the ethics-review process. People contacted me to ask advice on research ethics or the development of an ethics application or how to respond to a letter from a committee. Relevant information came out in commentaries on listserves I am involved with, not all of which are directly related to research ethics. Data were collected watching television, where research ethics issues are increasingly raised in news stories and even regular programming. For example, in an American television series called *Medical Investigations*, one story line revolved around an ethical breach in breaking the code for a blinded study and included talk about the IRB (Institutional Review Board, the name commonly used in the U.S.) and the conditions imposed by the IRB—and what would happen if the IRB found out about the breach. And, it included everyday talk with everyday people as I went about my daily life.

Research ethics review is now in the public consciousness and talk about research ethics, including issues related to ethics-review, have permeated everyday life. Data for the project are everywhere and in all kinds of forms. When colleagues and everyday folk ask me what my research is about, they generally volunteer their "ethics story." Research for the project did not begin on a particular day and at a particular time. It has a history and a present—and hopefully a future. In the research I draw on past experiences as well as current ones. The research, the ethnography, is an on-going part of my everyday life and consciousness. Other researchers will claim that they engage in such things as well, and they do. The difference is that for those using some paradigms all this is considered extraneous to the research, subjective, or "noise" that must be addressed (Fitzgerald, Paterson, & Azzopardi, 1997). For the ethnographer, all of this is part of the ethnographic process.

Some of what now seems the most important and informative situations, the ethnographic moments, are not those I could have predicted and, as a result, I did not include them in my ethics application. I did note, however, that the research was ethnography and I have not deviated in that regard. I have done all I specifically proposed to do—and more. Is this approach to knowledge unethical? I suspect that for most ethnographers this would be a non-question, but for others, those unfamiliar with the nature of ethnography, this might be a reasonable question. Whether or not it is a question goes back to the nature of knowledge and how it is constructed. In some paradigms anything beyond that stated in the application would be considered a

"deviation in the protocol" rather than an expected part of the knowledge generating enterprise. If the researcher does not notify the committee, the researcher would be considered to be engaging in unethical research. In other words, different perspectives on how knowledge is constructed or acquired provide different grounds for considering what is unethical in research.

Ethnographic moments

There are particular times that are of special importance in ethnography (and many other kinds of research). What I call the "ethnographic moment" is that critical incident, moment, experience, event that evokes a quest for knowledge or understanding (meaning) or sudden insight into a phenomenon of interest. Like critical incidents as defined by Fitzgerald and her colleagues (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2000; Fitzgerald, Beltran, Pennock, Williamson, & Mullavey-O'Byrne, 1997; Fitzgerald, Williamson, Russell, & Manor, 2005), they are situations that require some attention, action or explanation; they are situations for which there is a need to attach meaning.

No one can predict when such moments will occur. Ethnographic moments can happen anytime and often at the most unlikely of times and places. However, we can predict situations where they are most likely to occur. For example, they should occur "in the field" as the ethnographer goes about the business of doing ethnography. As ethnography is an "experience near" form of research, the ethnographer sees or experiences something that seems to standout in some way, something that either directs the ethnographer into a particular line of inquiry or evokes that eureka moment when things suddenly seem to make sense. And, finally, they are those "cultural scenes" (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972) suspended in time that epitomize a particularly salient point. The latter often form the core of the end product of doing ethnography, an analytical description and interpretation of cultural scenes, for, again, ethnography is both process and product (Fitzgerald, 1997).

Ethnographic research is filled with ethnographic moments, with some of more critical or epistemological importance than others. These moments are pivotal events in the quest for knowledge and understanding of human phenomenon and the nature of being human. This article opened with one ethnographic moment and was stimulated by another: being "uninvited" to a seminar related to research ethics, set in the context of other experiences related to the study, including experiences related to obtaining permission to observe research ethics review committees in the process of deliberation. This moment is important for many reasons. Here I will use this moment to explore why of all the kinds of research reviewed by ethics committees ethnography seems to be the most contentious from both the perspective of researchers and committee members — and other gatekeepers. In doing so I will suggest that it is not so much that the review process is based on "the medical model," an explanation common in the literature and the talk of key informants, but that the reasons are grounded first and foremost in the nature of ethnography and a lack of understanding of the ethnographic process and ethics in relation to ethnography. The exploration is guided by the need to understand why participants in this seminar (but not others) and members of some ethics-review committees (but not others) seem uncomfortable with the presence of an ethnographer who openly admits to being an ethnographer. It explores why such discomfort occurs even when the processes involved are not different from those that occur naturally, namely being observed by others who are trying to use that behavior to understand and interact appropriately in a particular context, or what we might call "everyday ethnography."

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Everyday ethnography and ethnographic moments

I use the idea of everyday ethnography for two reasons. First because humans often use the processes associated with ethnography in an informal way in their everyday lives to help them understand human phenomenon so they can behave in appropriate ways. In other words, people often use these processes (informal interviews, casual conversations, observation and participant observation, mini-natural experiments) in everyday life to help with meaning making or making sense of the world around them and their place in it. For ethnographers the concept of everyday ethnography is particularly relevant because for them ethnography once learned becomes a way of life (Dingwall, 1980; Homan, 1991). They both consciously and unconsciously engage in ethnography in every aspect of their lives because ethnography is a way of being in the world. Once an ethnographer; always an ethnographer. You cannot turn it off like the light in your office at the end of the day.

The fact that the processes associated with ethnography seem so mundane and everyday might help explain why it is the focus of much of the discussion about problems with the research ethics-review process. It can seem too simple, too seemingly intuitive, to be "scientific" and valuable as an approach to or stimulus for insight and understanding. Furthermore, the guiding questions in ethnography can seem mundane and associated with seemingly uncomplicated aspects of being human ("well, everyone knows that" kind of phenomena)—and thus unscientific or unimportant, when compared with questions commonly posed by those using other paradigms (is this treatment better, safer, cheaper than that treatment). Combined with the fact that the specific questions might not be easily articulated before becoming immersed in data collection, the research appears disorganized and "soft" or unscientific. For many involved in assessing research and ethics applications the question (or more preferably the hypotheses) must be "obviously" important and clearly articulated. If it is not, then they can consider the research unethical; as many people involved in this research said: it is unethical to waste people's time on unimportant research. Thus value judgments about what are important topics for investigation, how they are articulate, and what methods are valued are brought into the review process (De Vries, 2003). If the person involved in assessing the research only knows about a narrow range of methodologies or believes that only some methods can contribute to the construction of knowledge then problems related to assessment should be expected.

As Dingwall (1980, p. 976) notes, "a good deal of research consists of observing publicly available events or using the researcher's own life-experience." Ethnographers, particularly anthropologists, commonly (but not always) use everyday events as the stimulus or focus for ethnographic work. Riding the bus, waiting in lines, and other everyday events have all been the object of what some call the "ethnographic gaze." Ethnographers do not always know ahead of time when these events, these ethnographic moments, will occur. Because they cannot always know when such situations might occur or when they might become important in their work, for example years after the fact, their work does not fit with the expectations of the ethics-review model that assumes that kind of knowledge before the fact. The current model does not allow for emergent knowledge and events, not just emergent paradigms. Thus, ethnographers are not always in a position to obtain ethics approval before the data event and, therefore, there is a methodological mismatch with what is expected with the current review process (e.g., Bosk, 2004). This does not mean, however, that the ethics of research like ethnography is being ignored; many books, articles, and commentaries have been written about it. Some recent additions to this literature include those by Cantwell, Friedlander, and Tramm (2000), Fluehr-Lobban (2003), King, Henderson, and

Stein (1999), van den Hoonaard (2002b), and Tolich (2001). Rather, research ethics must be viewed as embedded in every aspect of and the everyday process of ethnography (Meskell & Pels, 2005). Research ethics are not a "tag-on," but an essential and integral part of ethnography.

More relevant here are situations such as Silverman's (2002) use of a similar type of seminar as the one I was to participate in as the basis for her exploration of issues in anthropology. She notes in her book that she did not formally obtain informed consent from the participants, but that it was clear to participants over the years that she was considering using material from the seminars as the focus for an ethnography.

The situation seems to even more clearly parallel one described by Williams (Williams & Klemmer, 1997). She had a similar experience in relation to a seminar where she proposed to study anthropology through full participation in a seminar on anthropology. In a paper relating events associated with her proposal to engage in full participant observation in the event, Williams begins with an outlined block that contains the following:

> This space is where I would have like to present a complete ethnography of the SAR advanced seminar on cyborg anthropology, because it seems to me next to impossible to convey the points I want to make about ethnography as science without a thorough account of this fascinating event. But some of my colleagues told me that studying them would be problematic — which vindicates the power not only of ethnographic authority but also of the prohibitions against its reflexive application, strenuously noted but often ignored by the participants themselves (including myself).

(Williams & Klemmer, 1997, p. 165)

Even more relevant are situations described by Bosk and De Vries (Bosk & De Vries, 2004; De Vries, 2003; De Vries, DeBruin, & Goodgame, 2004), who have encountered similar ethnographic moments in research on the sociology *of* bioethics and the ethics-review process. In the brief explanations provided to me by the organizers of the seminar in which I was to participate, the organizers suggested that my participation would also be problematic and might jeopardize the seminar going ahead as planned, a concern that also arose in Williams' case. The fact that I would be openly attending the seminar as an ethnographer involved in the study of the ethics-review process seemed to evoke angst in some of the people who were to be involved. This seemed to be the case even though before being invited I made it clear that I would be attending as an ethnographer of the ethics-review process, and by implication that would be part of the expertise I would bring to the seminar. The organizers already had a copy of the information sheet on the project and knowledge of the website before sending me an invitation to participate. From the very beginning my expressed intention was not to study the participants or the seminar per se, but to use the seminar context and discussions associated with it to inform my research, something I assumed other participants would be doing as well (see below). Thus I was somewhat surprised when I was uninvited. More importantly, perhaps, is that this event turned into an ethnographic moment that evoked a quest for greater understanding. I accepted the organizers' decision (see below). It was their right to choose to uninvited me for whatever reason. However, this action provoked a need to understand why, particularly given similar

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responses from some research ethics review committees about observing their meetings (see also De Vries, DeBruin, & Goodgame, 2004; Fitzgerald, c2005; Fitzgerald & Yule, 2004). On the other hand, I had not received this kind of a response from other conference, workshop, or seminar groups.

Quests for knowledge: Seminars as everyday professional and cultural knowledge making events

Events like seminars, conferences, and workshops are an important part of the lives of researchers, professionals, and scholars. They are common culturally salient everyday events. They are events designed for formal and informal discussion, the exchange of information, and consultation with peers and experts in the focal area. They involve people with some shared interest sharing information.

An important part of such events is what is called "corridor talk." Corridor talk is often considered the most important part of attending such an event. It is where much of the real work takes place. Downey, Dumit, and Traweek (1997, p. 245), in a parody of a dictionary definition, define corridor talk as:

> cor•ri•dor talk n 1: the practice of passing on tips, insights, and strategies about the means of production of academic work (as at professional conferences, where, it is frequently remarked, the most important business takes place "out in the corridor" rather than inside the meeting rooms) 2: nonascribable (off-the-record) but necessary information; practical gossip 3: common-sense, informal (not publicly taught) mentoring; the unsaid, but frequently said anyway (though not to everyone)

My assumption about such events, which I thought was reasonable before the ethnographic moment described here, is that most people attend events like seminars with the expectation of learning something that will contribute to their own work. They attend with the expectation that being present at the event will expand their knowledge about the focal topic and possibly other topics. They are often part of the quest for a eureka intellectual, analytical, or interpretive moment. Seminars in particular might be considered as events that involve the construction of knowledge or at the very least developing shared understandings of particular cultural phenomena. People attend such events to develop friendships and collegial relationships or connections with people who have similar interests or information or knowledge that will be of value to the attendee. The expectation that information obtained from participation in these events will contribute to one's own work is at the very least implicit, although descriptions of these events often make this point explicit. People attend such events as learners and, particularly when they present at them, teachers. Attendance at such events is often part of the professionalization process and can serve as events of incorporation. As Heath notes, "meetings such as these are terrains where boundaries of identity and difference are mapped and contested, stretching the limits of local cultural practices" (Heath, 1997, p. 68). Being invited to such event as a full participant (presenter and audience) affirms or acknowledges membership in a group of peers, especially when it is an invitation only event.

An ethnographic moment: On being uninvited to a seminar

The seminar to which I had been invited was an invitation only seminar on a topic of particular relevance to research ethics, one related to issues that are regularly raised in discussions at the ethics committees I was observing and in the literature on research

ethics.[2] The invitation came out of an interview/discussion with a key informant. During the discussion this person introduced the topic of a planned upcoming seminar and asked if I might be interested. If I was, the informant would talk with the co-convenor about offering me an invitation. I said that I would like to attend, even if only as a member of the audience, that I would be doing so as a researcher with a particular interest in the topic. I said that I thought participation would be very useful in my work as I would be able to listen to and talk with people who have special expertise in the area. The informant suggested that I send an email noting my interest in attending the seminar.

A couple of months later I received a formal invitation to attend the seminar with an assigned topic for which I was to prepare a paper. I accepted the invitation noting again that I would be attending as an ethnographer doing related research. Based on my implied understanding of such an event (and attendance at other such events), I suggested that I did not think that this would be a problem.

> I would like to accept your invitation. The one condition is that everyone should know that I am doing research in this area and will not be able to step out of my ethnographer's role. I assume that will not be a problem as I am sure others will be doing the same.

If this and other seminars, conferences, and workshops I attended during this research had not been related to research ethics I do not think I would have even thought that it was necessary to make this point explicit. I never have for events like this on other topics related to other research interests. I would have attended with the assumption that everyone was using the opportunity to inform and expand their own research or expertise. Thus I did not consider attending as a full participant observer potentially problematic. Obviously I was wrong. In this case it seems that others did not share this assumption or perspective. The organizers were kind enough to provide some explanation.

> I am writing in reply to your email about your conditions for participating in the conference on [topic area]. As we now have a more or less complete list of speakers and participants, I have started to raise with them the conditions you set out in your email [for the one condition see above]. I am afraid that a number of them are not happy with what you suggest and several have voiced quite strong objections. With the conference itself focusing on [topic area], I am sure you can understand that we are particularly sensitive to the issue of consent amongst our own participants. I am afraid this means that we cannot accept the conditions you have offered and that we will have to proceed without you. I am sorry about this but hope that we will have another opportunity to compare notes on research ethics and ethical review of research at some time in the future.

Reading this email was an ethnographic moment that produced a visceral reaction. It evoked a need for understanding because I had not expected this response. In my return email I made it clear that I was not challenging the decision, but noted that the response of potential participants raised an interesting intellectual question for me, including questions about the nature of such seminars and understandings of some concepts, in particular understandings of ethnography. I was simply trying to understand the

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[2] Further detail on the meeting is not essential to this discussion and is not offered to protect the identities of the people involved.

decision, something researchers generally do when people decline to participate in research.

> I must say that I am disappointed. I was very much looking forward to the conference. In fact I was going to contact you this week as I wanted to start working on the paper.
>
> I accept your decision, with sincere regret.
>
> I would, just for thoughtful purposes, like to raise an intellectual question. I do not expect a response.
>
> I find the response of the others interesting. It raises important issues about the nature of scholarship and research, and ethnography in particular. So if others use thoughts, material, or increased understandings from the conference in their work beyond these few days, which I assume is one of the expected outcomes, what will happen? The response would seem to indicate that they cannot do so? It raises important issues about the nature of research, what it is, and where it happens and when it begins and ends. Maybe something for the group to discuss.
>
> Well at least I was up front with the fact that I am a researcher and I do not (cannot) compartmentalise my life. As an anthropologist, and I hope a scholar, I cannot not turn off being a researcher.
>
> I do hope that we will one day have a chance to meet. Give my best to [name]. And, I hope you have a good conference.

I also sent an email to the person who initiated the invitation. Again, I made it clear that I was not arguing with the decision, but that it had raised some interesting questions for me.

> I do not know if [name] shared with you her recent email to me about the conference, but it seems I will not be attending the conference, for a very intriguing and interesting reason. I am obviously disappointed, but I do want to thank you for all your support and assistance. I hope there will be another opportunity to meet. I really enjoyed talking with you. I hope you all have a very interesting and successful conference.

The return email added to my need to try to understand this situation.

> I am sorry that we will not be seeing you at the conference. We discussed the condition that you laid down for your attendance at the conference (i.e. that the conference would provide formal data for your research and therefore that all participants in the conference would potentially be participants in your project). It is interesting that this condition raises questions about consent that are to some extent the focus of the conference itself. We thought that in order to meet your condition we would have to write to all those whom we have already invited, in order to gain consent to be participants in your research; and/or at the start of the conference gain such consent. Certainly in a conference of this type we could not take such consent for granted. We thought that doing either of these things would not be desirable, and it would only need one person to object for the conference to be derailed.

> I very much enjoyed our meeting and believe that your research is very important.

A few days later one of the organizers sent this email providing additional information:

> Thank you for your email and the questions you raise. I will try to give you a sense of the objections that the condition you proposed elicited from those to whom I spoke. Though it would be wrong to press people too hard to explain themselves, I got the impression that some felt that it would change the conditions under which they had accepted the invitation to take part in the conference, some that it would change the conference into a research site and alter the nature of the interactions and some that it was inappropriate for one individual to participate on a different basis from everyone else.
>
> I am sorry we have had to disappoint you with regard to the conference.
>
> It is, I'm afraid, inherent in the nature of consent that it can be withheld for what may be good or bad reasons. We have all had individuals or organisations decline to take part in research and it can seem both frustrating and incomprehensible. I am sorry that it may seem so in this case.

I responded with:

> Thank you for sharing this with me. Much appreciated.
>
> I have been thinking about this a lot. I think it may also reflect a difference in what people see as research and an understanding of ethnographic research in particular. Maybe it is also the transfer of ideas from biomedical and behaviour research where the research is viewed as a bounded entity rather than part of everyday life where, as I tell my students, everything data. I still need to think on this as understanding this situation may help me better understand some others that have come up in the research.
>
> If nothing else, this has given me some important things to think about in relation to my research.
>
> Again, thank you. And I do hope the conference goes well.

The responses seem consistent with the reaction Williams and Bosk and De Vries got when they proposed to incorporate participation in a seminar into their research. The main difference is that I was not planning to study the seminar, but was interested in how the seminar, with its discussions and the opportunity to talk with others with shared interests and those with particular expertise, might expand my understanding of the ethics-review process and the data I was collecting. As noted above, as an ethnographer, for me ever event is potentially relevant and "everything is data." Perhaps it was not clear to the potential participants that I was not going to be studying them specifically; they were not going to be the "object of study." Nevertheless, the situation raised questions for me that seemed relevant to my research and the reactions ethnographers (including me) report getting from ethics review committees when they propose to do ethnographic research. This ethnographic moment provided data to explore in the quest for understanding the nature of the ethics-review process and address one of the purposes of the research as presented in the project information sheet: "The intent is to better understand why some kinds of research present difficulties for ethical review committees and other research gatekeepers and the researchers who submit applications

for ethical review." Here the conveners and seminar participants functioned as gatekeepers to a site that most likely would have provided information that would help address this intention. In this case, even though I did not get to attend the seminar, the situation still provided relevant data and an ethnographic moment that pushed me to collect additional information as a way to try to understand the participants' responses.

The quest for understanding

In my quest to understand this situation, I used a process common to ethnography and turned to key informants, experts in the field, to obtain culturally informed interpretations. I also became more aware of discussions in other contexts and other events that seem to have the potential to contribute to developing an explanation for this event. For example, on an unrelated listserve there was a discussion a month or so later about access to the organization's board meetings. One person tried to explain why this board did not have open meetings by referring to similar kinds of organizations of which the person had been a member over the years.

> None of the organisations I was involved with threw their board meetings open to all members because often sensitive issues needed to be addressed, or difficult decisions needed to be taken, and these were always easier to accomplish with a smaller group of people involved. In retrospect it's amazing how often a seemingly innocent or non-controversial agenda could give rise to sensitive discussions best handled away from the public eye.
>
> To give just one example: Two of the board members at one organisation were so far apart on one issue that whenever there was any form of audience they dug their heels in and almost came to blows. At a closed board meeting, however, they found a way to compromise and the organisation could move forward. That would never have been possible in an open meeting.

Comments similar to those in the first paragraph above are scattered throughout my field notes in relation to explanations for why some research ethics committees are not open to observers. These comments are also similar to explanations given to me by other researchers who have attempted to observe ethics review or other committee meetings. Bosk and De Vries (Bosk & De Vries, 2004; De Vries, 2003; De Vries, DeBruin, & Goodgame, 2004) report similar experiences. The explanations are commonly presented using a rhetoric based on "confidentiality," a culturally salient concept given the research ethics review contexts (Fitzgerald, c2005). The explanation goes something like: the meetings and the discussions are confidential and, therefore, it would not be acceptable to have an outsider present who is not there for the expressed purpose of the meeting. Why this should be raises important questions about such meetings and their purpose (for some discussion on this see Fitzgerald & Yule, 2004). A comment by Bosk and De Vries (2004, p. 6) seems relevant here: "the requirement of subject confidentiality and anonymity, if stretched too far, does not permit ethnographic work in public domains" or, I would add, situations, like ethics committee meetings, where, in the opinion of many, the behavior should be publicly accountable.

Using ethnography to understand ethnographic moments

Most of the small group of international informants I turned to share a particular interest in research ethics, particularly in relation to social science research, including ethnography, and the ethics-review process. Others are close colleagues. I had had what I felt were relevant discussions with each of them and saw them as being in a position to share their expert knowledge in relation to something I thought was of common

interest. This is a group of people for whom I have particularly high regard. This was also a group I expected to be open and candid. I shared the body of the text of the emails (see above) with them without any identifying information in an email or verbally. Then I commented in an email or verbally:

> I think this is a really interesting response and similar to responses I have gotten from ethics committees when I have approached them for observations. I am trying to work through what this means, how to interpret it — and would appreciate your thoughts. I have some ideas, but I am sure I am missing something.

As I thought about this situation I found myself going back to my research proposal and subsequently attached to some emails a section on "the anthropology of ethics" from the grant proposal that I thought might be relevant or at least of some interest to them. In this section of the proposal (the following is a slightly modified version of that section) (see also Fitzgerald, 2005a, 2006) I suggested that

> ethics, including research ethics, and knowledge are "culturally shaped and constituted in relation to distinctive forms of life and social organization" (Good, 1994, p. 21). Because they are contextually and culturally bound they reflect the culture of society: its beliefs, morals, values, standards for behaviour, etc (e.g., Christakis, 1992; Kleinman, 1996; Weisz, 1990). Thus, I propose that many of the real and perceived "problems" commonly associated with the ethics review of research are, at least in part, cultural. They result when people do not view ethics as a cultural issue or understand that the research paradigms proposed are based on varying cultural assumptions, including assumptions about the nature of knowledge — its ontology and epistemology, that these different research paradigms are based on varying ideas about what constitutes important, ethical research questions and how to answer them. I propose that they are based on cultural ideas and assumptions about human beings, including ideas about personhood and the self (e.g., Kleinman, 1996; Lieban, 1990; Shweder, 1991; Shweder & Bourne, 1982/84), people's roles in research as either researchers or participants and their ability to make decisions about their role in the research process, even whether or not they should be involved.

Thus, even before this ethnographic moment, I already had some ideas (some hypotheses) that could serve as reasonable explanations, but I had lost sight of them in the time between writing the grant application and this ethnographic moment that occurred more than three years later. This situation seems to support that early hypothesis, but I needed to further support for my interpretation.

Reponses from key informants

All the key informants found this situation interesting and something worthy to "think with." In the course of several emails back and forth and in the verbal interactions (face-to-face or by telephone) there were some common comments and a few that were distinctive. Some of the people prefaced their comments with the caveat that they did not have all the contextual information they needed to inform their responses. I did not provide information other than what is presented above to maintain anonymity of the people involved.

Although there was general agreement that I had done the appropriate thing by informing people that I was an ethnographer and I was involved in related research, a few people "played" with the idea that maybe I could have attended without making this

information so explicit up-front and then participated just as the others did. Then if there was something that I might want to use I could have contacted the relevant people and asked their permission to use the information. (This is something that is often seen in the literature, generally identified as a "personal communication.") Again, this was only presented as part of their thinking or playing with the situation; none really thought I should have engaged in the seminar in this covert way.

There was some discussion that perhaps there had been some misunderstandings related to some of the terminology used, for example the use of the words "study" and "ethnographer," that there might not be a shared understanding of these concepts among people from different fields. There was talk about ethics as "universal," but how one is ethical depends on context and culture. One person used the concept of "respect" to make the point. Just what respect means and how it is demonstrated varies across cultures and contexts. What might be seen as respectful in one situation might be viewed quite differently in another. In this case I think what I had done was seen by most of the key informants as being respectful relative to this particular group of obviously highly educated people with particular knowledge and expectations in this area, particularly in relation to things like informed consent. One person suggested that ethics is sometimes used as a "cover for control" where the underlying values might not have been examined, or I might add, possibly as a way to avoid examining the underlying values or concerns. In other contexts I have used the concept of a "rhetoric of ethics" (Fitzgerald, 2005a, 2005c, 2006; Fitzgerald & Phillips, 2006) to describe situations where people use the concept of ethics as way out of situations they do not want to deal with or where the concept is used by gatekeepers as a form of social control over access to information, research sites, etc.

Several comments related to the possibility that participants might have felt threatened by me and the fact that I would be listening to, recording, and possibly "deconstructing" some of the discussion; that I might come up with observations, interpretations, or conclusions that would challenge their ideas or points of view. Some suggested that the idea that someone would be explicitly observing the group ("holding them under a microscope") might be intimidating and, like the contributor to the listserve suggested, some participants might feel that this would constrain the discussion and free exchange of ideas. People might not feel comfortable "brain storming" or working out ideas verbally and through group discussion. They might not want to risk appearing "foolish." Although none of the informants used this term, their comments suggest that there might be issues of "identity management" and people did not want information used that might present them in a way that might not be consistent with how they see themselves, or maybe it is just about a kind of professional insecurity.

Some suggested that if this had been an open, public conference then there should not be issues with a researcher participating as a full participant observer, but that given that this was an invitation only seminar the situation was different. This kind of seminar needs to be considered in terms of "private space."

None of this is different from what any other group might feel when asked if someone can observe them. Certainly all the same kinds of issues and concerns are factors to be considered. On the other hand, the purpose of this seminar was to explore particular issues in relation to a particular topic of general concern to researchers. Furthermore, observation and evaluation are an inherent, everyday part of the process of seminars. Everyone is watching, listening, and evaluating everyone else. This is not only in relation to the information being presented, but the way in which it is being presented and by

whom. There is even the expectation that people in such contexts will take notes. All of which is part of the nature of ethnography. The only real difference is, perhaps, that there is a cultural assumption that only the most refined ideas will find their way out of the seminar and into the public domain, such as copies of final papers produced as a collection of papers from the seminar. Seminar talk, like corridor talk, should remain "off the record."

The future of ethnography

All of this raises some concerns for the future of ethnography. Within the discussions about how to understand what was happening I suggested that this had some far reaching implications for the nature of ethnography and the development of knowledge about humans and the human condition. It provided, in part, the stimulus for a commentary I wrote for *Anthropology News* (Fitzgerald, 2005a, 2006) about how the ethics-review process can and is evoking shifts in what counts as anthropological knowledge. A comment similar to one that appears in that commentary was included in an email I sent to key informants.

> But it raises some important issues for ethnography into the future. Will all this mean that we cannot use our daily experiences as data in our work. Will we have to walk around with a sign around our necks that says: "I'm an ethnographer and anything you say or do may be used as data in my research."

I think the situation supports the idea that until others understand the nature of ethnography as one form of knowledge generation, ethnographers will continue to encounter problems in gaining access to particular research populations and getting through the ethics-review process. Perhaps of more serious concern is that the ethics-review process itself can present ethical dilemmas (Fitzgerald, 1994).

Conclusion

Ethnography is an everyday, experience-near form of meaning and knowledge making. "And meaning and knowledge are always constituted in relation to such worlds of experience" (Good, 1994, p.177). Like other forms of knowledge construction it is embedded in a system of beliefs and values about the nature of the world and the humans in it—and how to go about understanding such worlds and the human experience. It does not make it better than the other socially and culturally constructed forms of meaning and knowledge making; it is just different. As a result, it allows different kinds of insight into the human condition. If we are to every really understand this human condition, we need to be able to draw on all kinds of knowledge and means to acquiring it. As in the story of the blind men and the elephant, we need different forms of data and perspectives if we are to come to an understanding of the nature of elephants.

So what does this analysis of an ethnographic moment tell us? How can we use such analyses to address the ethical issues associated with the ethics-review process and the doing of ethnography? First, perhaps I have made too much of all this. Perhaps, this ethnographic moment is purely the product of poor communication and unwarranted assumptions on my part. On the other hand, there does seem to be a problem with a lack of understanding of the nature of ethnography, even among educated peers. One common assumption it seems is that ethnography, like the kinds of research more commonly associated with the ethics-review process, is bounded in time and space and can be easily presented as a discrete project with a clearly outlined and articulated methodology. We cannot make the assumption that others understand how unbounded

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and often unpredictable the ethnographic process can be. There appears to be a lack of appreciation that ethnography is a way of life that permeates all aspects of the ethnographer's life; being a researcher permeates all aspects of all researchers' lives. The difference is that ethnographers see all this is valid in the quest for knowledge, while many others do not. There is a lack of appreciation that approaches to knowledge can be opportunistic and associated with everyday activities, including meetings with colleagues, like seminars, and this is a legitimate part of the meaning-making process.

The assumptions of some that ethnography, its methods and guiding questions, are too often simplistic, ordinary, even unscientific indicate a lack of appreciation of the complexity of ethnography. For these people ethnography and providing ethnographers access to activities that enhance the social construction of knowledge is unethical when such activities do not fit neatly with the expectations and requirements associated with other approaches to knowledge construction. This presents ethical dilemmas, and ethnographic moments, that can present situations that both befuddle ethnographers and provides them with data rich opportunities for gaining insight into phenomena of interest. Many do not view such opportunities as valid data collection situations. For some this approach is too subjective and anecdotal in the most derogatory sense. Dealing with everyday life with everyday methods is not always valued as an approach to the understanding of humans and human phenomenon. There is the assumption that factors relevant for other kinds of research are always valid for understanding ethnography. Among these assumptions is that specific individuals are always the object of study, that the identities of individuals as specific actors is central to all forms of inquiry when the focus in really on what the behavior and statements of people and everyday interactions with them might tell us. In many ways much ethnography (and some forms of qualitative inquiry) is more collectivist than individualist oriented.

Overlaid on this is, perhaps, a form of discomfort among the elite of society when they become either the object of study or the means to the opportunity for study (De Vries, 2003). Particularly when these people are privy to specialist knowledge about research ethics (and the controversies surround this area) and, as a result, may set higher standards for access and take more control over the process. The potential to place in jeopardy the development and advancement of knowledge using particular approaches, especially those associated with the social sciences and humanities, is great. There is the potential to constrain them and change them into forms that at least appear to be more like those with which ethics committees are more familiar and in this way betray the core foundations of such alternative approaches to meaning making and knowledge.

So how can we address some of the dilemmas associated with the ethics-review of studies using approaches like ethnography? First, like De Vries et al (2004) and others, I think more ethnographic studies of the ethics-review process are needed. We need to base our understandings of the ethics-review process and approaches to it on sound data. My research suggests that the problems ethnographers and others, including medical researchers, have with the ethics–review process are more complex that common explanations that situates the problem in the review process being based on the "medical model." This is too facile an answer. Second, we need to continue to critically examine and modify the review process if it is to do more good than harm, and ethnography can help in this. Third, there is a need for more ethnographers to be involved in the review process. More importantly, they need to be involved in developing the policies, procedures, and guidelines that guide the process. This is a reasonable strategy and it helps. On the other hand, the kind of "group think" (Lo, 1991) that develops within ethics committees in an attempt to comply with regulations

and guidelines tempers the ability of committee members, even those with significant relevant expertise, from ameliorating some of the problems involved. Third, there is a need for better training of ethics committee members and researchers, a kind of training that goes beyond making them familiar with the guidelines or regulations, or even familiar with alternative ways to do research. There also needs to be more emphasis on helping ethics committee members, researchers, and research gatekeepers to identify the values, assumptions, and beliefs they bring to evaluating, understanding, and presenting research and the ethical issues various kinds of research present (Fitzgerald, 2005b).

The latter may be the hardest to accomplish, but may be of critical importance. One potential method for doing this came out at a conference on the ethics-review process held in Canberra, Australia, where I was involved as a full participant observer, an ethnographer. The fact that this idea (and many others) came out of the conference demonstrates how important openly participating in such conferences and seminars can be for the development of a deeper understanding of a phenomenon.

In my presentation at the conference I explored the idea that ethics committee members bring a lot of baggage to their positions on committees that includes a whole set of relationships, allegiances, values, and beliefs that set up potential conflicts of interests (Fitzgerald, 2005b). In the question and answer period, one member of the audience asked me what I recommended people do about this. I had already noted in my presentation that I did not think that these potential conflicts were necessarily problematic, but that I though it was important that people become aware of them. My "off the top of my head" response was that people might engage in development exercises of the kind use in cultural competency training (another research area of mine) to help people identify their allegiances, beliefs, and values and how these affect their responses to particular people, situations, and applications. I am now even more convinced that such exercises should be incorporated into the education and training of researchers and ethics committee members. Exercises that make such things explicit then allow the identification of strategies to deal with such situation so there is fair and equitable—and ethical—review of research.

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