

Conflicts of Interests, Hidden Relationships, Allegiances and Human Research Ethics Committees

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Abstract

Human research ethics committees have as their expressed mandate the protection of human participants in research. However, we often forget that ethics review is a very human group process. As these committees are social institutions made up of real live human beings, each member and the group as a whole have multiple, often hidden, relationships and allegiances that can create conflicts of interest that affect the ethics-review process. These relationships and allegiances include those with external agencies, including the institution, research sponsors, the community, government, and professional or other personal affiliations and relationships. Just as important, and possibly more so, they include relationships and allegiances within the committee itself and those in the lives of committee members. Based primarily on interview and observational data, this paper explores some of these relationships and allegiances and their potential effect on the outcome of the review process. It highlights the need to see the ethics-review process as a very human social process and not simply the mechanical application of rules, guidelines, or principles. As a very human endeavour, the web of relationships and allegiances associated with the ethics-review process have the potential to affect the nature and quality of the behaviour of all who are involved. It is sometimes the nature of these relationships, rather than the nature of the research, that is more critical to the nature of the review process and its outcome. Efforts to encourage reflection on the web of relationships and allegiances can be an important step in addressing the potential effects of conflicts of interests.

Key words: conflicts of interest, ethics committees, relationships, ethics-review process

Introduction

A conflict of interest is a state of affairs in which the performance of one's primary obligation (e.g., protection of human participants in research) is in conflict with, or perceived to be in conflict with, the satisfaction of secondary interests (DuVal, 2004). Recently, conflicts of interest have been one of the most common topics of discussion in relation to the research ethics-review process (e.g., Campbell, 2004; Elliott, 2005; Kopelman, 1999; Sales & Lavin, 2000; Sharav, 2003; Shimm & Spece, 1996; Wilson, 2004).¹ Most of the literature on this topic focuses on medical researchers and their relationships, and allegiances, in particular their relationships and allegiances with drug companies, and the potential financial conflicts that can result (e.g., M. Barnes & Florencio, 2002; Groeger & Barnes, 2003; Moynihan, 2005). Little of this literature focuses specifically on the research-ethics committee² as a group and the members as individuals or their need to identify or explore their potential conflicts of interests beyond those already outlined for researchers. The literature that does focus on committees and their members generally deal with 1) committee members who are also researchers who have applications before the committee (a continuation of the focus on researcher applicants) and 2) potential conflicts of interest between the committee, its members and the institution they serve, even though the committee is supposed to be independent of the institution (e.g., Chalmers, 2000; Emanuel & Steiner, 1995; Emanuel et al., 2004; Israel, 2004; Lowman & Palys, 2000; McDonald, 2000; Van Essen, Story, Poustie, Griffiths, & Marwood, 2004). The small amount of work on conflicts of interest associated with committees and their specific members (e.g., Chalmers & Pettit, 1998; McDonald, 2000; Van Essen et al., 2004) focuses on some of these more obvious areas. It does not generally address the full complex web of real and potential, often hidden, relationships and allegiances involved in the ethics-review process or the potential effect these may have on committee deliberations.

This paper uses data from a five nation study (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US) of the ethics-review process to identify some key relationships and allegiances and how they can affect the deliberations and decision-making processes of all committee members, often

¹ It was, in fact, the core theme of the Australian national conference where a version of this paper (Fitzgerald, 2005a) was first presented.

² Human research ethics committees are known by different names (e.g., HRECs in Australia, REBs in Canada, IRBs in the US) and may have different labels in institutions within a country. Here the term "ethics committees" will be used as a generic term for those committees that conduct an ethics review of applications related to human research.

without members being consciously aware of how these relationships and allegiances are involved. In doing so, it does not suggest that these relationships and allegiances are necessarily bad, an overarching theme in the conflict of interest literature, but it does highlight the need for committee members to make a conscious effort to identify and address the most important ones so they can be conscious of the potential effect they can have on how they respond to the applications before them. To borrow from John Barnes (1979, p.179): "The conscientious and ethically-aware [committee member] should not become so fully occupied in paying attention to the interests of others that he loses sight of his own." Thus this paper encourages committee members (and researchers) to engage in the kind of deep reflexive processes often associated with "qualitative" data analyses (see also Guillemin & Gillam, 2004) and encourages the use of a variety of training exercises in committee educational endeavours to identify the personal and cultural assumptions, values, beliefs, attitudes and relationships that influence them as committee members and citizens of the world. This approach seems reasonable if we accept that the beliefs, values, relationships, allegiances, etc that members bring to the cultural role of ethics-review committee member are cultural and get enacted in culturally specific ways (e.g., Christakis, 1992; Pels, 1999; Weisz, 1990), and that some of the conflicts that arise within committee meetings and between committees and researchers are really conflicts within the domain of culture and the cultural production and use of knowledge. This assumption underlies the project upon which this analysis is based.

Method

This paper is based on ethnographic research spanning the years 2002 to 2005 on the ethics review process in five countries: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK, and the US (<http://www.ethicsproject.com/>). It is based on the observation of 29 human ethics-review committee meetings, some by a single observer and others by two members of the research team, data from 212 formal interviews/discussions with key stakeholders in the ethics-review process (e.g., researchers — experienced and student; ethics committee members, chairs and ethics officers³; policy makers), informal interviews, the collection of information and documentation on instrumental cases volunteered by key informants, and extensive reviews of the literature and policy documents. It also involved full participant observation as a researcher involved in the development and submission of ethics applications and as an advisor to students and colleagues engaged in the review process. Data analyses included several approaches with the primary method being the use of several forms of deep reflective, iterative techniques common to the ethnographic process (e.g., Davies, 1999; Fitzgerald, 1997; Fitzgerald, Paterson, & Azzopardi, 1997; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). In fact, as indicated in the next section, analyses involved a set of processes that emerged and evolved over time. Added to this process was the opportunity for some key informants, particularly some who provided data specific to the issues addressed here, to reflect on and respond to the manuscript and ideas and interpretations presented.

Web of relationships

Early in the research in an attempt to make sense of some of the data obtained I began to outline the various kinds of relationships involved in the review process. I did this as a way to begin to understand the ethics-review process as culture and cultural process. My outline turned into a diagram developed using Powerpoint as one way to manage the complexity of the data. The development of such diagrams is often used in ethnographic and other research as a way to help conceptualise relationships between key components associated with the topic of interest, in this case the nature of relevant social relationships. Initially the diagram was based mainly on Australian committees under the 1999 *National Statement* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999), but it was informed by early work on the ethics-review process in the US. As the research progressed and brought in other countries, it has been refined. The version presented in Figure 1 is

³ "Ethics officer" is used as a generic term for a person who is responsible for administrative activities associated with the ethics review of human research. Again, these people can be identified using a variety of labels, even within a country. Many committees are served by a single ethics officer, many of whom do so part-time. In other institutions there might be several people who provide administrative assistance to the committee with the nature of this assistance varying somewhat from institution to institution.

still based primarily on the Australian system, but the research suggests it is generally applicable to the other four countries involved. The identities of some of the people involved may differ, but the diagram reflects the kinds of people commonly serving on ethics committees: researchers, community or lay members, lawyers (sometimes as lawyers, sometimes they just happen to also be lawyers), ministers or significant leaders from relevant cultural groups in the community served by the committee, one or more administrative support people (ethics officers). Some ethics officers, whether or not they are voting members, participate in the discussions; others do not. In some places there is a requirement or expectation that the committee will include people from the key populations involved in the research the committee commonly reviews.

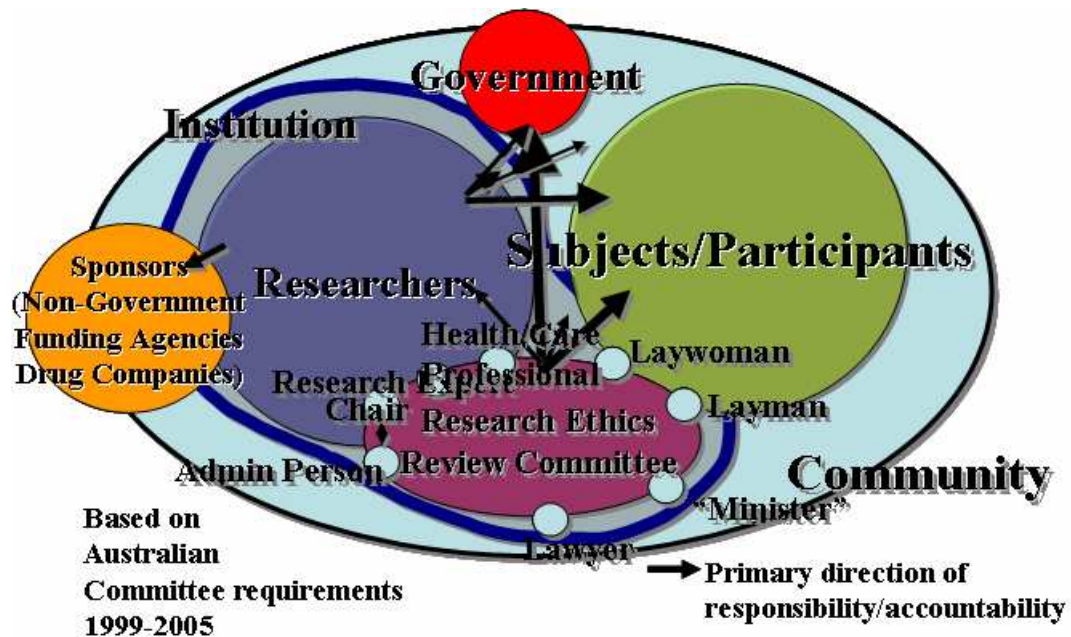


Figure 1. Web of Relationships & Allegiances

One of the things developing this diagram highlighted was the complexity of what I will call a “web of relationships and allegiances.” This diagram makes explicit several things that are often beyond everyday conscious awareness; in fact they almost seem too obvious to bear mentioning. First, the ethics-review process is a very real and complex human process; second, as these committees are social institutions made up of real live human beings, each member and the group as a whole have multiple, but not always the same, relationships and allegiances and these directly and indirectly affect their roles and perspectives as committee members and, thus, the ethics-review process in general. This is not a matter of “can” affect, but “does” affect, even when people might want to believe otherwise. We are never free of outside influences or the nature of internal relationships within any group in which we act.

This web of relationships and allegiances suggests a number of arenas in which there is the potential for conflicts of interest. These are conflicts that may move the emphasis of reviews from the expressed mandate of the protection of human participants in research and in some cases compliance with regulations to other, sometimes more personal, issues. Again, this does not mean that these potential conflicts are necessarily problematic; however, it does suggest the need to be fully aware of them. In fact, being aware of these conflicts and the potential they have on the decision-making process may actually enhance the review process. An explicit awareness can be used to encourage the exploration of the range of ethical dimensions and potential concerns and the source of these concerns. In some cases simply acknowledging the conflict or the potential web of

conflicts and how it may or may not be affecting the process is all that is needed. In other cases, steps may have to be taken to address and control the potential effect.

Individual and committee level

The web of relationships at the individual and committee level is one of the most important influences on the ethics-review process because ethics review is not the mere application of guidelines or regulations, even though some people tend to approach reviews with this as their primary aim. Members of the committees are real people who at the individual level can have personal and professional relationships across many sectors that can influence the work of the committee, including how the committee interprets and applies guidelines and regulations and develops and applies its policies and procedures. Such actions are not culture-free, nor are they free of individual influences such as the power of individual identities and personalities and personal experiences. As Barnes notes for research in general, the review "process is thus one in which several different parties are involved whose interests and obligations are partly parallel and partly divergent" (J. A. Barnes, 1979, p. 87).

And, there are the interpersonal relationships within the committee itself. If members of committees do not come to the committee with previously existing relationships with other members, such relationships develop during the course of their shared interactions. In some cases these are relationships marked by respect, even friendship. In other cases, the relationships are marked by previously existing tensions or power imbalances or these may develop within the context of committee work as people's ideologies, values, beliefs, biases, etc are revealed. These points, while seemingly obvious, are nevertheless worth exploring for they have significant potential to affect the way ethics committees work, respond to the applications before them, and they affect the results of their deliberations. In other words, people may play out their interpersonal relationships within the committee and with the researchers involved during the review process. Sometimes things like this seem so obvious that we tend to overlook them. In this paper and in the exercises I suggest, I want to raise them to the level of conscious awareness.

The various sectors in the diagram may have an effect through particular individuals. The most obvious, and the topic of much of the conflict of interest literature, is how the sectors relate to researchers on the committee who generally have relationships and allegiances to most of the sectors (e.g., the institution, sponsors, their profession and other researchers, the community, government as research or institutional funders, and the committee). However, just as important, and possibly more so, are relationships and allegiances of each committee member within the committee itself that are in addition to or separate from those at the macro level, including relationships and allegiances associated with being "citizens" of the community to use John Barnes' term. As Barnes has noted: "Research has an ethical dimension whenever it impinges on creatures with whom we have moral relations" (J. A. Barnes, 1996, pp. 180-181).

The nature of the required membership of ethics-review committees (the requirement to have a diversity of people) means that there are going to be potential conflicts of interest. If personal issues are added, then the potential is even higher. Every member comes to the committee with his or her own baggage, some of which we call expertise. They also come to the committee with other often seemingly unrelated bodies of knowledge, values, beliefs, etc — and particular interaction styles. Despite protestations to the contrary, each member brings with him or her a personal agenda that goes beyond the protection of humans who are involved in research. Some members are more conscious of these agendas within themselves and other members than others, as demonstrated in some of the discussions I had with ethics committee members. Every member has a personal reason for being on the committee and a particular history leading up to becoming a committee member. Some are members by choice and others by circumstance, for example some people are put on these committees by department chairs or other administrators in the institution. Some become members because they were nominated by a current or former member. Some are specifically approached because of their particular expertise and asked to become members. Some choose to become members because of prior experiences with the review process or because of some particular concern or interest and others answer ads in institutional or local newspapers and

in this way self-select to become members of the committee. And, as one chair told me, if a researcher complains about the committee, they are likely to get an invitation to become a member. The reasons behind why people become (and remain) members of the committee and the history of their becoming a member influence to varying degrees the nature of the meeting and review process, this very human form of interaction.

Some of these agendas have been obvious in our observations, for example when certain issues come up and every member of the committee turns to a particular member. At times it almost seems as though this action has been choreographed because all heads seemed to turn towards the person in unison. For example, in some meetings when, for example, issues related to women or other identified participant groups, aspects of information sheets, or technical issues related to the “science” of a particular application arose it was obvious as observers who was either considered the expert in this area or for whom it was a major issue. In turning to this person the committee was both acknowledging that this was this person’s “issue” or area of expertise and it served to give this person the opportunity to speak. When our impressions were tested by asking members about such situations, our conclusions were confirmed. For example, most committees have a member who has particular issues with some aspect of information sheets/consent forms. After one meeting I was told that Jane⁴ really has a thing for the way these documents are written and always has something to say so they always give her an opportunity to have her say. However, as she can go on and on about things like grammar they give her time to mention a few things and then suggest she give her comments to the ethics officer.⁵ In another case, every time a project involved women heads turned to one particular woman. Later she was identified as a “feminist” with strong feelings about the role of women in research and the protections afforded to them.

More often these influences affect the review process and the nature of the interactions during the meeting in more subtle ways; ways that may be beyond the consciousness of the members themselves. For example, members have roles outside of their professional and committee roles and thus allegiances to other sectors. Many members are parents and all are citizens of the community. This fact often came out in discussions related to research involving children, in fact second only to research involving drug companies is research involving children in raising the emotional tone of a discussion. When such research was being reviewed we would hear statements like: “I would never allow my child to participate in this research!”⁶ “If I was approached to include my child in this research I would ...” “As a parent I would want to know this research was happening in my child’s school. I think the researchers must obtain parental consent. I would need to know about this in case some problem came up afterwards. I’d know where it came from.”

In the last case, the children involved were teenagers and the topic was something that teenagers regularly talk about. I confirmed this by talking to some of my students and other young people who were the same age or a few years older than the target population in this and related studies. So the risks involved seemed no greater than those these young people encounter in every day life. In fact my young informants told me that the kinds of questions I suggested might be asked were pretty mild compared to the kind of talk that is a normal in their everyday conversations with one another. “Oh, we talk about that all the time.”

Other examples include responses to research with people with particular diagnoses, illnesses, or experiences. Members would make comments like: “It is about time someone did research on this topic. When my [father, mother, friend, ...] was ill no one was doing research on this.” Or alternatively, “Oh no, not another project on ... There have just been too many studies on this. The people must be sick of them by now.” “If my [father, mother, friend, ...] was asked to participate in one more of these studies they would be very upset.” “I remember when my [father, mother, friend, ...] participated in a trial like this. It was [wonderful, horrible, etc].” In other words, talk about experiences outside of those directly related to the application and their role as a committee

⁴ Not her real name.

⁵ These are just a few examples. Nearly every committee has its Jane. Attention to information sheets and consent forms regularly takes up significant portions of the meeting time.

⁶ Most quotes are a synthesis or paraphrase of comments made during meetings.

member (i.e., past committee discussions or cases reviewed by the committee) often came into discussions and judgements of particular applications and the response (good or bad) was coloured by these other first and, often, second-hand experiences.

Two more examples might suffice to make the case. These are important examples because one of the duties of the committee is to consider the special issues related to potentially vulnerable populations. I say potentially vulnerable because ideas about vulnerability are themselves socially and culturally constructed. Thus, for example, all people who have experienced a mental illness are not incompetent to make decisions about participating in research (e.g., Michels, 1999; Prentice, Gold, & Carpenter, 2005; Roberts & Roberts, 1999), although data collected for this project suggests that for many committee members having ever had a mental illness makes a person eternally vulnerable, an assumption based on cultural understandings of mental illness in western societies.

Although I could use research with people with mental illness as a key case example, the one I want to use deals with drug users and how the assumptions of the committee members based on other relationships, allegiances and experiences can affect their judgement about how such research should be conducted and whether or not it should be approved. This situation came up several times in discussions in committees and with key informants and it came up in more than one country. Committee members often used their assumptions about the lives of people who use illegal or recreational drugs to make decisions about such things as whether the committee will accept the proposed recruitment strategy or gifts (e.g., Ritter, Fry, & Swan, 2003). Monetary awards, even modest amounts like \$5-10, are often not allowed. Even food vouchers have been disallowed. "They'll just sell them to get money for drugs."

Key informants who work with drug users find such assumptions naïve and uninformed. One key informant told me that he once took a person who was representative of the proposed participants, a person who was also a representative of one of the organisations to be involved in the research, to the meeting with him as a community representative. (In another situation, the committee itself included a person from the target population as a member of the committee.) In this situation applicants can choose to come to the meeting to discuss their research. Whether or not researchers can attend committee meetings varies (Fitzgerald & Yule, 2004). However, this was one of the few cases where a key informant reported taking his or her own community representative to a meeting. After the committee members got over their discomfort with this person and had raised a number of questions this outside community representative told the committee members to "put aside their middle class values and get real." In at least one case the representative told the committee that many of these people are poor and just trying to survive. The issues the committee were raising were not relevant to this population. The community involved wanted the research and supported it and the concerns the committee had were not concerns. Perhaps more importantly, key informants and this representative made the points that these people wanted to be valued for their contribution to the research and to be treated with respect, including being treated as adults capable of making their own choices. As noted above, one minor concern raised by the committee was paying the people \$5 to participate. Members of the committee were concerned that the participants would use the money to buy drugs. This person and others said that was ridiculous, particularly given the amounts of money being discussed.

The key informants involved in this discussion, and many others, talked about the ultraconservative approach of some committees, that when faced with situations they do not understand or do not have information on that committee members "revert to stereotypes and misinformation from the media or whatever." In other words, they draw on other bodies of knowledge related to experiences associated with other sectors in the web of relationships and allegiances. In one of these cases the key informant was also using the case to make the argument that community representatives on committees are not always representative of the communities that might be involved, that they are often from a different class — and culture. Although committees can use outside experts, this option is not often used, even in relation to methodology or the "science" of the research. In fact, evidence of using outside experts to inform the committee's deliberations was exceptional.

People are not always aware of how much other components of the web affect their behaviour in particular contexts. This is because they do not necessarily reflect on such things, unless they come up in situations like interviews with people like me researching the ethics-review process or when unexpected conflicts occur during a meeting that encourage the more reflective members to think about why this situation occurred or, in some cases, when committee members take part in educational workshops or retreats that encourage such reflection. Addressing internal conflicts of interest requires some reflection on the interests or agendas particular members bring to the meeting and the review of particular applications.

Good committee chairs do this well and, thus, are often able to manage such conflicts in ways that enhance the process rather than bog it down. They know the committee members and are aware of the interests that members bring to the committee and when appropriate use these interests to enhance discussion. They might ask a particular member for that person's thoughts. However, they also use this knowledge to try to avoid "soap boxing" by particular members. They provide opportunities for these people to present their views, but use a form of controlled discussion and final decision making that acknowledges disparate views and still lets the committee come to a reasonable conclusion. They lead and manage the meeting process. They often do this by using consensus decision-making processes and may acknowledge the person's concerns verbally at the meeting and in the minutes, and, if of relevance and significance, they may pass on the concerns to the researchers involved. The good use of these kinds of skills and their smooth integration into the meeting are essential and have a significant impact on both the nature of the meetings themselves and the decisions the committee makes. The importance of the chair and the skills this person brings to the position cannot be overemphasized.

These internal real and potential conflicts of interest seem less problematic in committees made up of members who know one another and have a shared sense of their roles and some mutual respect. These are committees where the members have had time to work out their relationships with one another. Over time the committee may have consciously or unconsciously configured the committee so it is made up people who have compatible interaction styles — or they may have developed conditions that predispose them to what Lo (1991) refers to as "groupthink." On the other hand, some of the committees actually use potential conflicts to great advantage and negotiated the resolution of such conflicts in a way that the committee's decision is balanced and well informed.

However, when these conflicts are not addressed, the committee can lose sight of its purpose and the researchers have to deal with the result: letters from the committee that in effect are a means for the committee to deal with its internal conflicts. One example is when the discussion evolves to the point where it is really a discussion based on something that arose from the discussion and not from the application itself, a discussion that may have gotten off topic and the researcher is asked to resolve a problem that is actually a discussion that is related to one or more members' areas of interest or internal or personal conflicts, but has little do with the submitted application. Thus, the researcher gets a decontextualised question that makes little sense when the researcher was not privy to the discussion and cannot find the basis for the question in their application or, in some case, the issue has been addressed in the application but the committee lost sight of this as their discussion meandered into new areas that actually dealt with members' concerns that are unrelated to the application.

Another method used by committees is the "Let's ask the researcher" approach. This is a common ploy used by some people, most often chairs, to stop a discussion that is not likely to be resolved with more discussion. It can be used so these often over-packed meetings can move on. Thus some of the points in the letters researchers receive are not about ethical issues in relation to the proposed research, but reveal the internal conflicts of the committee and problems it may have dealing with these conflicts. This point alone makes some of the seemingly inexplicable comments in letters to researchers make sense by contextualising them into this complex web of relationships and potential conflicts of interest.

Macro Level

Now let us briefly turn to other sectors on the diagram (Figure 1). The diagram highlights the major relationships and allegiances involved. These include those with external agencies, including the institution, research sponsors (which can be government, drug companies and other organisations), the community, government itself because it sets the guides for ethics review — and because it may directly or indirectly fund the research, and professional or other personal affiliations and relationships. The size of each domain indicates something about the magnitude of its importance in this context. The overlapping of domains indicate the areas where there is most likely to be shared or conflicts of interests. The arrows and their size suggest the direction and magnitude of the relationship. They could easily be presented as two-way arrows to emphasise the conflict of interest potential. Thus the strength of the potential conflict is not necessarily of the same magnitude, but the arrows are only an indication of the relative strength and pull of the relationship. Each committee and each application to be reviewed may evoke slightly different configurations and different magnitudes of potential influence.

Each sector on the diagram is worthy of serious consideration. I will highlight just one to demonstrate how important each can be. I have chosen the one that seems to be particularly common in the literature and discussions in committees: conflicts related to sponsors of research, mainly drug companies. Drug companies have most certainly been demonised in the contemporary literature and the review process (Fitzgerald, 2005b). However, drug companies are not the only sponsors of research. Much research is sponsored by government and private organisations, each of which sets an agenda for the kind of research it will support and in this way influences the research agendas of researchers, most of whom are dependent on these funds for their research and for their standing in the academic context (grants from particular organisations have greater saliency than others). In recent years there has been a push in academic organisations to develop “partnerships with industry” and researchers are rewarded within the institution for developing them. Thus the sector here called “sponsors” can be large and diverse, including organisations that can affect all aspects of human life. Some of these sponsors and their agendas will resonate with committee members and be consistent with their own agendas (the Cancer Council, the Heart Association, etc). On the other hand, some sponsors raise the ire of some committee members, drug and tobacco companies being the most common examples. Drug companies are likely to evoke the more obvious conflicts of interest. As a result, it may be even more important for people to identify those sponsors with whom they share an agenda because people are less likely to question their motivations and those of the researchers in relation to the research proposed.

Macro and Micro Level Intertwined

That conflicts of interest influenced decision-making becomes obvious in listening to the comments, stories, and explanations committee members present in their discussions of the applications before them. They relate personal experiences with the sponsor (or other sectors on the diagram) and those of family, friends, and colleagues. They raise issues as consumers and citizens. They talk from their experiences as parents, former patients or research participants, and researchers. They engage in the everyday talk of everyday people presented with a particular stimulus. They bring in everyday experiences and expertise. It is clear when they are positively inclined towards a particular sector and when they are not. Their comments may or may not be supported by potentially verifiable information and may reflect an individual perspective or sense of conflict that is not necessarily generalisable. They may also reflect the difficulty in staying up-to-date with current standards or guidelines on particular kinds of research or research with particular populations. These comments, stories, and explanations can have a significant impact on the outcome of an application review. In this way they become potential conflicts of interest for the member, but they may also reveal conflicts of interest among the committee members.

The interests of the most vocal, those with particularly good skills at debate and persuasion, or the most emotional, can often affect the outcome of the review process, particularly when the discussion establishes a moral conundrum for the members of the committee. In this case it is the introduction of a real or potential conflict of interest within the group that is important. Thus internal conflicts of interests can mirror those at the macro level.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the need to see the ethics-review process as a very human social process and not the mechanical application of rules, guidelines, or principles, even if sometimes it appears to be or appears to need to be the mere application of rules or guidelines. As a human endeavour, the structure of the system and the review process itself, with its complex web of relationships and allegiances, has the potential to affect the nature and quality of the behaviour of all who are involved and, in fact, does affect them. It is sometimes the nature of these relationships, rather than the nature of the research, that are more critical to the nature of the review process and its outcome. With a heightened awareness of this we can develop a better understanding of the ethics-review process, and its products, including letters and other communications with researchers, and what the process does and does not, what it can and cannot, accomplish.

The discussion presented here suggests a need for activities that allow people to identify the potential conflicts of interest that influence their interactions within committees, with researchers, and, perhaps more importantly, the decisions they make. The need for training of committee members has been highlighted both in the literature and in interviews conducted for this research. Many people become members of committees with little or no preparation, but a particular history and agenda. Some committees provide regular opportunities for committee members to enhance their knowledge and skills related to the ethics-review process. Many of these activities are oriented towards knowledge and understanding of how to apply the relevant guidelines, regulations or laws. There is a need to expand the kind of programs available to current and potential members of ethics committees and the researchers who submit applications to them at the local and national level.

Based on the premise presented here, I would encourage educational efforts to include the opportunity for people to explore the values, beliefs, assumptions, etc about research and the nature of knowledge production, and the web of relationships and allegiance that bear upon consideration of ethics applications and the ethics of conducting particular research projects. One model for such an effort can be drawn from the work that has been done in the area of developing cultural competency among healthcare workers (e.g., Fitzgerald, 2000; Fitzgerald, Mullavey-O'Byrne, Clemson, & Williamson, 1996).⁷ These efforts often begin with exercises that allow people to identify and challenge some of the beliefs, values, assumptions that underpin their attitudes and behaviours. In this case, it would be particularly important to be sure the exercises focus particularly on the web of relationships and allegiances of each member and the committee as a whole and how these affect the review process. Given the diagram that initiated my reflection in this area, it would be reasonable to suggest that people engage in a mapping exercise where they identify those entities that have the most obvious influence on them, with facilitators encouraging people to move beyond the obvious. The second part of such an exercise might then involve identifying some of the beliefs, values, and attributes of each of those sectors and how these might influence decision-making. Although it would be important for such activities to take place within a group setting, particularly among members of a committee, this is an exercise the individuals can do for themselves. It might also be interesting for people to try and develop maps that they think reflect the relationships and allegiances of their colleagues within the committee and the researchers who submit applications to the committee. This consciousness raising exercise might help people, committee members and researchers alike, to identify the factors that influence their decision-making and the potential conflicts that might arise within committees or between committees and researchers. This might enable more informed decision making and help people highlight the factors that influence their decisions. Decision-making in ethics committee meetings is greatly influenced by many factors. It is not simply the application of guidelines and regulations or even ethical principles. Even if it was, these other factors would still influence the interpretation of those guidelines, regulations and principles.

⁷ I am indebted to a member of the audience at the conference when I first presented a version of this paper for asking me how to address this issue. At the time this was the first thought that came to me. Upon reflection and after discussing the idea with key informants, it seemed more and more relevant and useful as a potential strategy. In fact, it seems some committees already use exercises like this in their educational activities.

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