

# Research ethics in a changing social sciences landscape

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## Abstract

The role of research ethics committees, and research ethics issues more broadly are often not viewed in the context of the development of scientific methods and the academic community. This topic piece seeks to redress this gap. I begin with a brief outline of the changes we experience within the social sciences before exploring in more detail their impact on research ethics and the practices of research ethics committees. I conclude with recommendations for how the existing research ethics processes may be made more future-proof.

## Keywords

Social sciences, research ethics, research ethics committees, neoliberalism

## Introduction

The role of research ethics committees has long been explored, discussed and critiqued, specifically in relation to ensuring participants' health and safety is well established (Coleman and Bouësseau, 2008; Gelling, 1999; Guillemain et al., 2012). In addition, commentators have highlighted the importance of the circumstances and contexts in which the research is conducted, as well as their protective functions not only for researchers, but even more so for institutions (see, e.g. Coleman

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and Bouësseau, 2008; Guillemin et al., 2012; Schuppli and Fraser, 2007). How researchers view these protective functions depends quite significantly on an institution's research culture, its quality of communications and the clarity of its systems (Brown et al., 2020; Guillemin et al., 2012; McAreavey and Muir, 2011). However, the role of research ethics committees, and research ethics issues more broadly are often not viewed in the context of the ongoing development of scientific methods and the academic community.

This topic piece seeks to redress this gap. Building on my experiences of the current discourses from the United Kingdom, I begin with a brief outline of the changes we experience within the social sciences before exploring in more detail their impact on research ethics and the practices of research ethics committees. I conclude with recommendations for how the existing research ethics processes may be better futureproofed.

## **The changing social sciences landscape**

Over the past decades, the social sciences community has seen a number of significant changes, impacting on the broader social sciences landscape. Many of these developments are linked to the natural evolution of research and the requirement for scholars to identify unique and innovative contributions to the existing fields. As a consequence of this drive towards originality, researchers continually adjust and adapt existing methodological approaches, thereby being innovative, whilst at the same time reconfiguring existing boundaries, and ethical considerations. These considerations of methodology and ethics alongside questions around power, hierarchy and the 'ownership' of research have, for example, led to a linguistic and narrative turn (Atkinson, 1997), a participatory turn (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995), a reflexive turn (Foley, 2002), a creative turn (Kara, 2015) and a turn towards the sensory and embodied (Pink, 2015).

In addition, broader societal rethinking about equality and diversity also filters into the realm of social sciences research. Movements like 'MeToo' and 'Black Lives Matter' as well as the global climate activist strikes 'Fridays for Futures', have highlighted the role individuals may play in bringing about change, as well as the importance of distributing responsibilities and recognising contributions from those individuals. Within medical fields, this is expanded upon in such a way that there is now an increased emphasis on involving patients in the planning of their care and treatments, as well as in relevant research, not just in the United Kingdom, but also elsewhere (see, for instance, Heyen et al., 2022; Malterud and Elvbakken, 2020). One consequence of the trend towards more egalitarian research with distributed roles and responsibilities is that an increasing number of charities and independent organisations are developing their own research agendas, specifically to explore 'what works' in evaluative and exploratory studies. With this shift towards a more participatory and egalitarian outlook, organisations and charities,

and indeed local communities themselves, are proactively looking to organise, initiate and commission research. Social sciences researchers are therefore no longer purely researchers, but advocates, allies, activists and practitioners in the context of their research. And the research itself is not ‘a process of knowledge collection [where the] interviewer digs nuggets of knowledge out of a subject’s experiences’ (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2015: 57). Instead, researchers seek to collaborate with their participants in the co-construction of knowledge.

Another significant development in recent decades, relates to the higher education sector as a whole. In the 21st century the neoliberal academy with its emphasis on internationalisation, globalisation and the development of a knowledge economy still prevails (Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, 2017; Olssen and Peters, 2005; Roberts and Peters, 2019). One of the consequences of the generic marketisation of higher education is the rise of the precarity and casualisation (Lopes and Dewan, 2014; Taberner, 2018). Where in the past academics would have found permanent contracts relatively quickly, nowadays doctoral school graduates enter a labour market that is characterised by poor job security, and many short-term contracts. Fears of losing one’s minimal contract can lead to academics not feeling able to take sick leave (Hadjisolomou et al., 2022) and possibly working at several different universities at the same time merely, to make ends meet.

Wider societal changes have further impacts on the sector that cannot be overlooked. If before the Covid-19 pandemic many countries saw an uptick in gig economy, the new, post-pandemic world-order relies even more heavily on independent workers, freelancers and self-employed contractors. The Covid-19 pandemic also had other impacts; it is now not uncommon for more senior researchers and academics to find themselves with reduced working hours and even redundancies (Kınıkoğlu and Can, 2021; Watermeyer et al., 2021). With rising food prices, fuel costs and inflation, the financial situation for many has become so dire that university employees, especially those on part-time, temporary contracts, can now find themselves relying on foodbanks (Fazackerley, 2022). To tide themselves over, but also to escape the hamster wheel of academia where they often feel that they are not moving forwards or onwards, many scholars seek alternative and complementary ways to earn a living. Some develop their own business ideas and become consultants or independent researchers, whereas others step into research roles at non-academic institutions, like charities (Caterine, 2020; Segal, 2020).

Whilst all of these changes are often openly discussed, there is relatively little consideration of how they impact research ethics and the work of research ethics committees, which I shall turn to next.

## **The impact on research ethics**

To explore how the landscape of the contemporary social sciences is changing and impacting upon ethical considerations, let me return here to two dominant issues

raised in the previous section: the increase of participatory, egalitarian, co-constructed research approaches and the rise of non-university-affiliated research agendas.

Participatory, egalitarian and co-constructed research is characterised by its fluidity and uncertainty as researchers and participants work together to explore synergies and ideas before formally formulating the research questions, methodology and methods. Practically therefore, research in these contexts is a dynamic process of information and transformation, of being and moving. Consequently, an authentic, one-point snapshot of a proposed research project in these contexts cannot be construed; the ethics parameters are constantly in flux and continually negotiated and renegotiated within the researcher-participant relationships. This is a particularly pertinent factor in research where researchers may have built relationships with participants long before undertaking a research project (Hersh et al., 2021). Researchers, therefore, struggle to align the generally static ethics application forms as per institutional requirements with the realities of their research approaches. The consequences can only be a poor compromise, rather than a fully thought-through ethical way of working.

On the other hand, researchers increasingly find themselves without access to a research ethics committee and the ability to apply for ethics approvals for their projects. In countries like the UK, ethics approvals for social sciences projects are generally granted via higher education institutions. As more independent organisations and charities develop their own research agendas, so there are more researchers who are not affiliated with higher education institutions.

In some countries there are companies or organisations that will accept submissions from individuals or organisations for review and provide feedback on a proposed project. The New Zealand Ethics Committee (<https://www.nzethics.com/>) is one such not-for-profit charity. However, there is no such provision in most countries. As a consequence, researchers find themselves in a situation where they cannot have their projects reviewed by an ethics review board, and thereby are not granted an official ethics approval number. That in itself should not worry an ethics board, as the individuals would still be able to carry out their work ethically. There are many robust sets of guidelines available from learned societies such as the Social Research Association, the British Educational Research Association, the British Psychological Society, the American Psychological Association or the American Association for Public Opinion Research as well as from most publishing companies. However, the reality is that these independent organisations and researchers are severely disadvantaged. In recent years, publishing companies and research funders within the social sciences have become more stringent regarding ethics approvals. In high-income countries in particular, researchers are expected to have their research projects formally approved; assurance of adherence to one of the above-mentioned codes is no longer sufficient. Many journals, publishing

companies and funders only support research projects if researchers can provide evidence of having received ethics approval and a specific approval number. Yet, there are no opportunities for independent researchers to apply for funding or support in order to gain the formal ethics approval through organisations like the New Zealand Ethics Committee, for example.

Precarity and casualisation also impact ethics in other ways. With the increased need for individuals to build more competitive *curricula vitae* than ever before, many academics take up roles within academia that are ‘voluntary’ or ‘contributing to institutional citizenship’, whereas more senior academics are required to meet different performance criteria to demonstrate high standing and contributions to their fields of study. It is therefore not uncommon to see predominantly early careers researchers make up the pool of reviewers of the higher education research ethics committees (Fisher, 2021; Lynch et al., 2022; Serpico et al., 2022a). The experience gained will undoubtedly be valuable for those individuals. Yet, there is a significant risk that the quality and consistency of reviews is somewhat compromised when reviewers cannot be constructively critical because they have to worry about their employment security and relationships with colleagues (Hicks et al., 2021; Serpico et al., 2022b).

Although the premises are different, the end result of the dominant concerns remains the same: namely, that existing ethics approvals processes have become ill-suited with many seeing the ethics approval processes as a bureaucratic rather than meaningful task aimed at institutional protection (Feeley, 2017; Grady, 2015; Hicks et al., 2021). The role of an ethics committee to advise and protect an institutional entity is important. However, as has been shown, this role is at odds with the realities, practicalities and pragmatics of the changing social sciences research community. Instead, we need to aim at future-proofing research ethics processes.

## **Future-proofing research ethics processes**

A first obvious recommendation for future-proofing research ethics processes would be to introduce an ‘approval in principle’. Instead of applying with a fully developed research proposal, individuals could ask to have their project ‘approved in principle’ when the details of the research may still be vague. That would offer the institutions the protection they need in terms of ethical behaviours in the field whilst the researchers are connecting with participants and stakeholder groups to explore the contexts, settings and parameters to develop a full research proposal. This will enable individuals to demonstrate compliance with institutional processes around financial guidance and workflows, but also to engage in ethical research in the context of participatory designs and practitioner research, where the fluidity of projects often makes a full initial approval process unpracticable. Practitioners and practice-based enquirers would also benefit from such an

approach; they would be able to apply for ethics approval in principle for their general practices where they would not necessarily have a clear focus or research question in mind, and are experimenting with and in their practice. Although some higher education institutions appear to support an ‘approvals in principle’ process, they effectively do not: in such instances, researchers are encouraged to seek the input from communities and participants for participatory projects, but once those researchers return to the drawing board with their project to gain full approval, reviewers often overturn what is brought to them (Cross et al., 2015; Ham et al., 2004; McDonald and Capous-Desyllas, 2021).

This leads to a second obvious recommendation: instituting reviewers whose role is to review and approve ethics applications. Currently, the vast majority of ethics reviews in the UK context are undertaken voluntarily under the umbrella of institutional citizenship with individuals not being allocated specific working hours or remuneration. Consequently, reviewers are commonly not experts for the kinds or project they review, which will lead to non-specialists overturning the participatory work undertaken. There would be an opportunity here to develop committees with expert reviewers that would enable the consideration of projects within the realm of individuals’ disciplinary contexts. Potentially, institutions could collaborate to exchange knowledge and expertise, rather than insisting that each researcher undergo the process at their ‘home’ institutions (Serpico et al., 2022a, 2022b).

Additionally, universities, publishing companies and research funders must begin to recognise and try to counteract the deepening chasm between university-employed and independent researchers. This could be achieved if these stakeholders demonstrate support for ethics processes that are outside institutional affiliations. Rather than merely insisting on evidence of ethics approvals, and thereafter reneging the responsibility for making research culture ethical, universities, publishing companies and funders should set up research ethics committees that support the work of scholars and organisations without institutional affiliation. The role of such research ethics committees would not be to protect an institution, but to ensure that research is completed ethically, that participants are safeguarded and that researchers do not come to any harm, as is ultimately the aim of research committees. Although funding such an endeavour would require significant financial commitment from universities, publishing companies and funders, this would be a natural step in the current move towards a more equitable, diverse and inclusive culture in higher education.

Finally, and underlying these recommendations and financial commitment, is the need for an attitudinal shift, especially amongst the leadership in higher education institutions. Many social sciences researchers already consider research ethics as an opportunity to critically-reflexively explore their thoughts or assumptions in decision-making, and to engage with matters of social justice (Kara, 2018).



Crucially, there is also a need for senior managers to respect these foundational principles and the need to embed them within research ethics processes and committees. Instead of considering ethics as a matter of litigation, libel, complaints and tribunals, they must encourage and enable research ethics committees to become more supportive, developmental and dynamic, as otherwise the ethics approvals processes will fail to keep in step with the changing landscape of the social sciences research.

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